

## **THE COLLEGE ESSAY**

The application essay has been a part of college admission since the explosion of college enrollment after World War II. The essay is a special opportunity to introduce yourself. You have an attentive audience that believes this part of your application will give useful additional information. Although the admission committee will not choose or reject you on the basis of this single element, the essay can be a strong voice in your favor, a way to stand out for the rest, a determining factor for a "gray zone" application. So, the challenge is to have your own say with power and precision. Clearly there is pressure here, and it is natural for anything that is challenging to be a little threatening. With you as the subject, you actually have all it takes to succeed.

### **RECIPE FOR A DRAFT**

#### **How to Kick-Start Your College Essay**

Sometimes the hardest part of writing a college admissions essay is just getting started. Here's a quick exercise to get pen to paper (or keyboard to computer).

##### **Step 1: Think about yourself**

What are your strengths and weaknesses? What are your best qualities? Are you a plugger? An intellectual? A creative type? Curious? Passionate? Determined?

##### **Step 2: Choose a positive quality you'd like to convey to the admissions committee**

Don't pick an event or something you've done. President of the Nuclear Awareness Club is not a personal quality. Focus on a quality of your mind or of your character. Complete this sentence: "I am a very \_\_\_\_\_ person."

##### **Step 3: Tell a story**

Set a timer for 20 minutes. Pretend you're taking an exam at high school and responding to, "Tell a story about an experience or time when you showed you were a very \_\_\_\_\_ person." Use the characteristic you identified in Step 2. Write or type non-stop for 20 minutes; force yourself to keep telling the story and what it reveals until the timer goes off.

##### **You're Done**

Okay. That's it. You've got a rough draft for your college application essay. Look at the college application forms and see what questions they ask. No matter what the questions are, you've already identified the important characteristic you want to convey to each college.

### **THREE STEPS TO A GREAT COLLEGE ESSAY**

#### **You, in 500 Words or Less**

The college application essay is a chance to explain yourself, to open your personality, charm, talents, vision, and spirit to the Admissions Committee. It's a chance to show you can think about things and that you can write clearly about your thoughts. Don't let the chance disappear. Stand up straight and believe in yourself!

#### **The Essay Writing Process**

Okay, boot up your computer and let's get to it. To write a college essay, use the exact same three-step process you would use to write an essay for class: first, pre-write, then draft, and finally, edit. This process will help you identify a focus for your essay, and gather the details you'll need to support it.

##### **Pre-writing**

To begin, you must first collect and organize potential ideas for your essay's focus. Since all essay questions are attempts to learn about you, begin with yourself.

- **Brainstorm:** Set a timer for 15 minutes and make a list of your strengths and outstanding characteristics. Focus on strengths of personality, not things you've done. For example, you are responsible (not an "Eagle Scout") or committed (not "played basketball"). If you keep drifting toward events rather than characteristics, make a second list of the things you've done, places you've been, accomplishments you're proud of; use them for the activities section of your application.
- **Discover Your Strengths:** Do a little research about yourself: ask parents, friends, and teachers what your strengths are.
- **Create a Self-Outline:** now, next to each trait, list five or six pieces of evidence from your life—things you've been or done—that prove your point.
- **Find Patterns and Connections:** Look for patterns in the material you've brainstormed. Group similar ideas and events together. For example, does your passion for numbers show up in your performance in the state math competition and your summer job at the computer store? Was basketball about sports or about friendships? When else have you stuck with the hard work to be with people who matter to you?

### Drafting

Now it's time to get down to the actual writing. Write your essay in three basic parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.

- The introduction gives your reader an idea of your essay's content. It can shrink when you need to be concise. One vivid sentence might do: "The favorite science project was a complete failure."
- The body presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and incident to show rather than tell.
- The conclusion can be brief as well, a few sentences to nail down the meaning of the events and incidents you've described.

An application essay doesn't need to read like an essay about *The Bluest Eye* or the Congress of Vienna, but thinking in terms of these three traditional parts is a good way to organize your main points.

There are three basic essay styles you should consider:

- **Standard Essay:** Take two or three points from your self-outline, give a paragraph to each, and make sure you provide plenty of evidence. Choose things not apparent from the rest of your application or light up some of the activities and experiences listed there.
- **Less-Is-More Essay:** In this format, you focus on a single interesting point about yourself. It works well for brief essays of a paragraph or half a page.
- **Narrative Essay:** A narrative essay tells a short and vivid story. Omit the introduction, write one or two paragraphs that grab and engage the reader's attention, then explain what this little tale reveals about you.

### Editing

When you have a good draft, it's time to make final improvements to your draft, find and correct any errors, and get someone else to give you feedback. Remember, you are your best editor. No one can speak for you; your own words and ideas are your best bet.

- **Let It Cool:** Take a break from your work and come back to it in a few days. Does your main idea come across clearly? Do you prove your points with specific details? Is your essay easy to read aloud?

- **Feedback Time:** Have someone you like and trust (but someone likely to tell you the truth) read your essay. Ask them to tell you what they think you're trying to convey. Did they get it right?
- **Edit Down:** Your language should be simple, direct, and clear. This is a personal essay, not a term paper. Make every word count (i.e. if you wrote "in society today," consider changing that to "now").
- **Proofread Two More Times:** Careless spelling or grammatical errors, awkward language, or fuzzy logic will make your essay memorable—in a bad way.

## WHAT DO COLLEGES WANT TO KNOW?

Generally, there are three types of questions: The "you," the "why us," and the "creative." Here are tips and actual sample questions for each type. Don't assume that the questions are currently being used by a college (most colleges adjust questions annually).

### The "You" Question

Many colleges ask for an essay that boils down to, "Tell us about yourself." The school just wants to know you better and see how you'll introduce yourself. For example:

- "Please complete a one-page personal statement and submit it with your application." (James Madison University)
- "How would you describe yourself as a human being? What quality do you like best in yourself and what do you like least? What quality would you most like to see flourish and which would you like to see wither?" (Bates College)

### Your Approach

This direct question offers a chance to reveal your personality, insight, and commitment. The danger is that it's open-ended, so you need to focus. Find just one or two things that will reveal your best qualities, and avoid the urge to spill everything.

### The "Why Us" Question

Some schools ask for an essay about your choice of a school or career. They're looking for information about your goals, and about how serious your commitment is to this particular school. For example:

- "Why is UVM a good college choice for you?" (University of Vermont)
- "Please tell us about your career goals and any plans you may have for graduate study." (Westfield State College)

### Your Approach

The focus is provided: Why did you choose this school or path? This should be pretty clear to you, since you probably went through some kind of selection process. Make sure you know your subject well. For example, if you say you want to attend Smith College to major in dance, the school will be able to tell how carefully you've chosen (Smith doesn't have a dance major).

### The "Creative" Question

Some colleges evaluate you through your choice of some tangential item: a national issue, a famous person, what you would put in a time capsule, a photograph. Here the school is looking at your creativity and the breadth of your knowledge and education. For example:

- "Do you believe there's a generation gap? Describe the differences between your generation and others." (Denison University)

## Your approach

Again, you have something to react to, a way to show yourself and write about your real views. Just don't forget the importance of writing an informed essay. For example, don't write about a fantasy lunch with a famous writer and get the titles of her novels wrong. Also, when thinking about how creative to get, use common sense. Being creative to the point of wacky is a risk you may not want to take.

## SOME SAMPLE ESSAY QUESTIONS

Here's a sample of recent college application essay questions. The answer is always within your grasp – just make your response *yours* and you can't be wrong.

- “The past is never dead. It's not even past.” So says the lawyer Gavin Stevens in Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*. To borrow from Steven's words, what small event, either from your personal history or the history of the world, is neither “dead” nor “past.”
- What one person, class, book, or experience would point to as having had a significant effect on the way you think about something? Explain.
- Think about all the things you hope or expect to gain from your college experience, and then tell us which two or three you would place at the top of your list if you had to make up such a list today. Be as specific or as general as you like.
- Please relate your interest in studying at \_\_\_\_\_University to your future goals. How do these thoughts relate to your chosen field of study?
- Think about a major challenge you have faced in your life. Describe how it has affected you, and more importantly, how you have changed as a result.
- Please write on a matter of importance to you. Any topic, and any form of written expression, is acceptable. As a guideline, remember that we are especially interested in issues of personal significance.
- What risks have you taken in life? What were the circumstances and the results? How have you benefited from risk taking?
- Develop a story involving dental floss, a cricket, and a tomato. Conclude your story with the phrase, “and that is how I saved the world.”
- Discuss an ethical dilemma you have faced and how you chose to deal with it.
- If you could invent one thing, what would you invent? Why? How would humanity benefit from this invention? What would be the negative effects, if any, of your invention?
- There are limitations to what grades, scores, and recommendations can tell about an applicant. We ask that you write a personal essay that will help us to know you better. In the past, candidates have written about their families, intellectual and extracurricular activities, ethnicity or culture, school and community events, people who have influenced them, significant experiences, personal aspirations, or topics that spring entirely from their imaginations. There is no “correct” response. Write about what matters to you, and you are bound to convey a strong sense of who you are. (*Please limit your essay to 500 words.*)

## ANALYZING TWELVE ESSAYS

The 12 sample essays that follow demonstrate a variety of strengths (focus, proof, simple language, structure, vividness) and weaknesses. **None is presented as a perfect or “correct” college essay. These sample essays are commonly available and readily familiar to college admissions officers. Plagiarism may result in your application being rejected.** These samples are meant to suggest the breadth of options you have in introducing yourself to a college. A look at these samples may help you avoid the pitfalls, enjoy the variety, and end up with an essay that gives a connected, strong, and vivid picture of you to the colleges of your choice.

### **Sample 1**

I guess it was inevitable that I’d be on hockey skates at some point in my life, but I did not expect that I’d become one of a rare group of female ice hockey officials before I even reached high school. Being born into a family of hockey players and figure skaters, it seemed that my destiny had already been decided.

Right from the beginning, my two older brothers and my father strapped me up and threw me onto the ice. I loved it and, in my mind, I was on my way to becoming a female Gretzky! But my mom had to think of something fast to drag her little girl away from this sport of ruffians. Enter my first hot pink figure skating dress! That was all it took to launch fifteen years of competitive figure skating. Even though figure skating soon became my passion, I always had an unsatisfied yearning for ice hockey. It took a great deal of convincing from my parents that competitive figure skating and ice hockey didn’t mix.

My compromise became refereeing ice hockey; little did I know that I was beginning an activity that would influence my character and who I am today. When I began, I would only work with my dad and brothers. Everyone was friendly and accepting because I had just started. I soon realized though that to get better I needed to start refereeing with people I wasn’t related to, and that’s when my experience drastically changed. An apologetic smile and an “I’m sorry” wasn’t going to get me through games now. As I began officiating higher-level games and dealing with more arrogant coaches, I suddenly entered a new male-dominated world, a world I had never experienced before. My confidence was shot, and all I wanted to do was get through each game and be able to leave. Sometimes I was even too scared to skate along the teams’ benches because I would get upset by what the coaches would yell to me. “Do you have a hot date tonight, ref?” was a typical comment that coaches would spit at me during the course of a game. In their eyes, I did not belong on that ice, and they were going to do whatever they could do to make sure no women wanted to officiate their games. I was determined not to let them chase me off the ice.

I made the decision to stand up for myself. I never responded rudely to the coaches, but I did not let them walk all over me and destroy my confidence anymore. I started to act and feel more like the 4-year certified Atlantic District Official that I am. There were still a few situations that scared me. One time I called a penalty in a championship game during the third overtime and the team I penalized ended up losing because they got scored on. I knew I had made the right call, even though I was unnerved when I saw the losing teams’ parents waiting for me at my locker room; for the moment I wished I hadn’t called that penalty. Although it was scary at the time, I stood my ground and overcame my fears. That was an important stepping-stone in my officiating career and in my life.

After four years of refereeing, I still can’t say it’s easy. Every game hands me something new and I never know what to expect. Now I have the confidence and preparation to deal with the unexpected, on and off the ice. I now also know to take everything with a grain of salt and not let it get to me. I have learned that life is just like being out on the ice; if I am prepared and act with confidence, I will be perceived as confident. These are the little lessons that I’m grateful to have learned as a woman referee.

### **Things to Notice About This Essay**

1. The author tells an interesting story about her experiences as a referee.
2. A sense of her personality—determination, flexibility, good humor—comes through in the narration.
3. Details like “Do you have a hot date tonight, ref?” make the narration memorable (we’d love to hear more of these kinds of details).

4. The essay needs a faster start. The first paragraph (three sentences) says the same thing in both the first and third sentences—and gives away the essay’s surprise in the second! A good revision would delete all of paragraph one and start at paragraph two.
5. There’s too much frame here and not enough picture. The essay needs further development, especially about the difficulties of becoming and being a ref, to keep it vivid.
6. The author should “dwell” in the meaning of the experience a little more at the end—“I wonder about...I also think...Sometimes I believe...” Significant experiences like this one, woven through many years of the author’s life, don’t mean just one thing—there are more insights and lessons to explore here.

## Sample 2

From the time I was able to realize what a university was, all I heard from my mother’s side of the family was about the University of Michigan and the great heritage it has. Many a Saturday afternoon my grandfather would devote to me, by sitting me down in front of the television and reminiscing about the University of Michigan while halftime occurred during a Michigan Wolverines football game. Later, as I grew older and universities took on greater meaning, my mother and uncle, both alumni of the University of Michigan took me to see their old stomping grounds. From first sight, the university looked frightening because of its size, but with such a large school comes diversity of people and of academic and non-academic events.

In Springfield High School, non-academic clubs such as the Future Physicians and the Pylon, both of which I have belonged to for two years, give me an opportunity to see both the business world and the medical world. These two clubs have given me a greater sense of what these careers may be like. In Future Physicians, I participated in field trips to children’s hospitals and also participated in two blood banks.

Currently I hold a job at Maas Brothers. This lets me interact with people outside my own immediate environment. I meet different kinds of people, in different moods, with different attitudes, and with different values. This teaches me to be patient with people, to have responsibility, and to appreciate people for what they are.

In the community I am active in my church Youth Group. As a high school sophomore, I was our church’s representative to the Diocesan Youth Fellowship. I helped organize youth group events, the largest being “The Bishop’s Ball”, a state-wide event for 300 young people. I also played high school junior varsity soccer for two years. As a senior I will be playing varsity soccer, but in the off-season. As a junior I coached a girls’ soccer team for the town. This gave me a great deal of responsibility, because the care of twenty-four girls was put into my custody. It felt very satisfying to pass on the knowledge of soccer to another generation. The girls played teams from other parts of Florida. Though their record was 3-8, the girls enjoyed their season. This is what I taught them was the greatest joy of soccer.

The past three years of my life have given me greater visions of my future. I see the University of Michigan as holding a large book with many unread chapters and myself as an eager child who has just learned to read. I intend to read a probe into all the chapters. The University of Michigan offers me more than the great reputation of this fine school, but a large student body with diverse likes and dislikes, and many activities, both academic and non-academic, to participate in. With the help of the University of Michigan, I will be successful after college and be able to make a name and place for myself in our society.

## Things to Notice about This Essay

1. It follows a general essay organization, with an introduction, several body paragraphs about different activities, and a conclusion that returns to the earlier idea of Michigan’s diversity.
2. It has no focus but rather jumps around from the school to the writer and from point to point. Notice especially the lack of transition from the first paragraph to the second: how did we get from Michigan’s diversity to the writer’s clubs?
3. The body paragraphs lack *proof*: What are these clubs and jobs, what did he do in each one, how many field trips were taken, and what was his role?
4. What’s Pylon? What does he do at Maas Brothers?
5. There are plenty of generalizations but no evidence to back up any of them. How did these activities give him a greater sense of the career world? “Participated” and “interact” are pretty vague words. Compare the discussion of Maas Brothers with the hockey ref’s story.

6. There is very little specific knowledge of what the University of Michigan has to offer.
7. The style is rather stuffy and awkward (“while halftime occurred”, “the care of twenty-four girls was put into my custody”).
8. Most important, nearly everything described here appears elsewhere on the application, under sports, jobs, extracurricular activities, and alumni connections.
9. The writer would be well advised to focus on *one* of the things discussed in this essay. Perhaps he could show the reader his work with the girls’ soccer team. What he did to make Jennifer and Gretchen and Courtney enjoy soccer even though they only won three of their games would be more vivid than a lot of talk about passing things on to future generations.
10. In short, the essay seems full of information and displays adequate form, but it lacks focus and *proof*.

### Sample 3

My most important experience sought me out. It happened to me; I didn’t cause it.

My preferred companions are books or music or pen and paper. I have only a small circle of close friends, few of whom get along together. They could easily be counted “misfits.” To be plain, I found it quite easy to doubt my ability to have any sort of “close relationship.”

After the closing festivities of Andover Summer School this past summer, on the night before we were scheduled to leave, a girl I had met during the program’s course approached me. She came to my room and sat down on my bed and announced that she was debating with herself whether she wanted me to become her boyfriend. She wanted my reaction, my opinion.

I was startled, to say the least, and frightened. I instantly said, “No.” I told her I on no account wanted this and that I would reject any gestures she made towards starting a relationship. I would ignore her entirely, if need be. I explained that I was a coward. I wanted nothing whatsoever to do with a relationship. I talked a lot and very fast.

To my surprise, she did not leave instantly. Instead, she hugged her knees and rocked back and forth on my bed. I watched her from across the room. She rocked, and I watched. Doubts crept up on me. Opportunity had knocked and the door was still locked. It might soon depart.

“I lied,” I said. “I was afraid of what might happen if we became involved. But it’s better to take the chance than to be afraid.”

She told me she knew I had lied. I had made her realize, though, how much she actually wanted me to be her boyfriend. We decided to keep up a relationship after Andover.

Even then, I was not sure which had been the lie. Now I think that everything I said may have been true when I said it. But I’m still not sure.

I learned, that night, that I could be close to someone. I also realize, now, that it doesn’t matter whether or not that person is a misfit; the only important thing is the feeling, the closeness, the connection. As long as there is something between two people--friendship, love, shared interests, whatever else--it is a sign that there can be some reconciliation with fear, some “fit” for misfits. And it shows that fear need not always win, that we can grow and change, and even have second chances.

I am still seeing her.

### Things to Notice about This Essay

1. It follows the standard essay pattern: an introduction (short), a series of supporting paragraphs for the body, and a conclusion (here, a summary paragraph and an end sentence).
2. It has a *focus*: his anxiety about relationships.
3. It has *proof*: the story of his conversation with a girl. Again, focused narrative development has made the proof vivid.
4. It is short, to the point, simple, and yet memorable. It is interesting without being grand, noble, or cosmic.
5. The style is simple and direct, employing short sentences and simple words to tell a simple story.
6. It coordinates and enriches an application full of academic achievements and high scores and grades. It is information definitely not found elsewhere in the application.

### Sample 4

My childhood left three months ago on a plane to Austria.

It was a sad day, the end of June, when my baby cousins moved away. They had lived nearby for almost five years, and now they were moving to a country too far to visit with any regularity. My cousins were a fundamental part of my life; when they were not with me, they were on my mind. A week had never gone by without a visit from them and I doubted my life would be the same without them. They brought back the untroubled days of my childhood, through games, adventures, and silliness; and yet they helped mature me from an at-times selfish teenager into a responsible, mature adult.

My aunt and uncle moved to New Jersey from Boston, with their 1-year-old daughter Yasmeen, in the winter of 1998. They lived in an apartment on the side of our house and I was ecstatic to have our family, especially a baby girl, so close to us. Yasmeen had close friendships with each of my sisters, but I knew the one that developed between us was the strongest. As she began to work on her own and talk in full sentences, I realized the extent of my influence upon her. I would notice her syntax and mannerisms mimicking mine. I also noticed when she'd copy some of my more unpleasant actions, arguing with her mother after I had done the same. Yasmeen made me realize what been a role model really was.

When Maya was born in 2000, Yasmeen had a hard time adjusting. She was jealous of the attention we all paid to her new younger sister, so I did my best to pay attention to her when she might have not been noticed. Once Yasmeen overcame her jealousy, she was able to enjoy Maya's presence in our lives, like we all did. Maya grew up fast, too, it seemed. Each day, they got a little bit bigger, and I tried to take advantage of our times together, doing my best to free my schedule for my two favorite people.

My experience with Yasmeen and Maya has brought me to realize the importance of influential people. I know that I have helped Yasmeen and Maya grow, but "the babies" have made an even great impact on my own life. They have shown me how to be a parent, a sister, a cousin, a babysitter, a child, and most importantly, a friend. My relationship with my cousins has made me a better person—a more patient person, with the ability to tolerate endless questions and spilled juice; an exuberant person, able to have fun and be happy with others and sometimes, when I'd rather not, for the sake of others; a role model, showing the babies the ethics of life, right, wrong, and in between; and a compassionate person, able to be responsible, forgiving, and loving. Yasmeen and Maya made me know that I can and do affect people's lives and emotions. They are where I leave a lasting impression. And maybe, as they grow, they won't remember all the fun times we had, but I do know they'll remember the things I tried to teach them about life and love and family.

### **Things to Notice about This Essay**

1. The essay has a sharp, strong beginning and a fresh honesty that conveys the events of the author's life and her outlook.
2. The style is simple and the topic is, too. But we believe in this story because of its simplicity.
3. The author proves that this has been a significant experience by the lessons she enumerates in the last paragraph.
4. The reader needs to know a little more about the circumstances of these moves from Boston to New Jersey to Austria, in order to understand the context of the essay.
5. A few more specific examples in the second and third paragraphs would give them the same strength and vividness as the "spilled juice" reference.
6. Having shared this interesting story, the author might find a few more insights and results to add to the last paragraph. The events seem affecting; the effects might be multiplied.

### **Sample 5**

It has come to my attention that our nations, and nations like ours, have long been plagued by a mysterious occurrence. An occurrence that is as perplexing as it is frustrating, and as baffling as it is widespread, a problem that finds its origins at the very foot of our society. The problem of which I speak is none other than "The Orphan Sock Enigma," the constant disappearance of individual socks during the laundering process. It is a problem familiar to all of us, and also one to which we have unwillingly admitted defeat.

I recently decided that this puzzle had remained unsolved for too long, and resolved to find an explanation. (In the grand tradition of science, I refused to be discouraged by the basic irrelevance of my cause.) But the truth that I uncovered is more shocking and fantastic than I could have ever imagined. My procedures, observations, and conclusions are as follows:

First, to verify that the problem exists, experimental and control loads of laundry were completely processed (put through the washer and dryer). In the experimental load (load with socks), by the end of the process, some socks were lost. But in the control load (load without socks), no socks were lost. Thus the problem was verified.

Next the progress of a load of socks was carefully monitored. The results indicated that sock disappearance occurs during the period of time when the load is in the dryer. Following this conclusion, a literature search was done and a very significant fact was uncovered: there is no mention of socks disappearing in dryers before the invention of dryers in the 1920s. All evidence clearly pointed to the dryer. And it is there that I would find the answer to the enigma.

Then, the actual experiment was done. In four separate trials, a number of socks (ten socks, or five pairs) were put through a normal drying cycle. The types of socks tested were selected by the highly accurate Harvey-Allman Principle Hierarchy and Zero Alternative Reduction Dimension (HAP-HAZARD).

| Trial #1                          | #1      | #2      | #3      | #4      |
|-----------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Initial Mass 10 socks             | 265g    | 270g    | 276g    | 261g    |
| Final Mass remaining socks & lint | 261g    | 266g    | 271g    | 256g    |
| Temp. running, empty dryer        | 65.56°C | 65.56°C | 65.56°C | 65.56°C |
| Temp. running, dryer with socks   | 70.56°C | 70.56°C | 71.56°C | 71.56°C |
| Net change in mass                | 4.0g    | 4.0g    | 5.0g    | 5.0g    |
| Net change in temp.               | 5.0°C   | 5.0°C   | 6.25°C  | 6.25°C  |

The mass of the total load was measured prior to processing. Upon completion of the cycle, the mass of the remaining load plus the lint collected was also measured. In addition, the temperature of a running, empty dryer was measured, as was the temperature of a running, full dryer during the cycle.

In each and every trial, one or two of the socks were lost (each from a different pair). More importantly, in each and every trial, there was a net loss of mass and also a net increase in temperature. These results suggested a test hypothesis. Through the use of Einstein's equation for mass-energy equivalence,  $E=mc^2$ , the net loss of mass was completely and totally accounted for by the net increase in temperature. All the evidence clearly pointed to one unavoidable, momentous conclusion: all the socks that had been disappearing in countries all over the world had been directly converted to energy (or that there was something seriously wrong with my dryer). I have just begun to realize the monumental importance and far-reaching implications of my discovery. Quite possibly, it could completely change the way we live our lives (and do our laundry) for years to come.

From further experimentation, it seems that the amount of energy liberated (and mass lost) is directly related to the amount of the fiber Spandex in the sock.

But for some reason, the Spandex must be in the form of a sock for the reaction to take place. Therefore, by increasing the amount of Spandex in a sock, one can increase the amount of energy liberated. It also seems that the reaction can be controlled by the presence of different numbers of fabric softening sheets, similar to the effect of control rods in a nuclear reactor. In light of these discoveries, my house is now completely powered by a "Sock Reactor".

I estimate that just a few "Sock Reactors" could supply power to a city the size of Chicago with zero danger (provided a good supply of fabric softening sheets is on hand). This is because one hundred percent of the mass is completely converted into energy safely, easily, and without leaving any of that unsightly radioactive waste common to those other name brand reactors. Therefore, you and your loved ones are spared from that embarrassing radiation sickness and unpleasant aftertaste.

Originally, I had hoped to keep knowledge of this discovery fairly restricted, but I fear that word has leaked out. I have reason to believe there is a merger planned between Interwoven Hosiery and General Power's nuclear division.

Although I have not been able to explain why only one sock out of a pair can be converted, it appears to in some way relate to a black hole, a time warp, and static cling.

Albert Einstein, the man who first discovered the mass-energy equivalence, never wore socks. I think that just about says it all.

### Things to Notice about This Essay

1. It is written in essay form. It has an introduction, several paragraphs of proof, and a clear conclusion. However, it's also a creative piece that is not easily translatable into formulas or patterns.
2. It has a *focus*: the "Orphan Sock Enigma".
3. It is specific: the problem, the research, the chart and figure make it real and vivid. The author clearly knows how to plan, run, and record a scientific study, as well as how to spoof one.
4. This is a production piece that few seniors could do. However, if you can write with comparable flair and humor, it is a reasonable option for a college essay. It presents a good picture of the writer, his interest in science, his imagination and humor, how extensively he thinks about life, and how well he can write.

### Sample 6

"I'm so bad at this," she said, shaking her red-orange hair. Michaela was standing in the middle of the soccer field holding a ball in her hands. She was trying to juggle it off her thighs, but couldn't do it more than three times in a row.

"No, you're not," I said. "Lots of the other kids are having trouble too."

She shook her head again. Without even noticing the other kids scattering after their balls as if they were trying to capture little runaway pets, she stuck out her bottom lip.

"Listen Michaela," I said, "When I was your age, I couldn't even juggle the soccer ball, let alone juggle it three times."

"But you can juggle it like a thousand times now, and I can't even get to four. It's not fair," she said.

Michaela pounded her soccer ball onto the ground and sat down on it. Her elbows rested on her knees and her chin came down on her fists. I sat down next to her.

"Michaela, how old are you?"

"Ten," she said jutting her chin out slightly.

"Do you know how old I am?"

"No."

"I'm seventeen. I've had seven years to practice my juggling and to get better at it. That's all it takes, practice. All you have to do is try to juggle the ball five times every day, and more when you can do that. Eventually, you'll be able to juggle more than I can," I said, looking at her with conviction.

She was staring at the ground pulling tufts of grass up and piling little haystacks on top of her cleats. I could tell she wasn't sure whether to believe me or not. I got up and went to help some of the other kids, to give her a chance to think. Helping them seemed to mix encouragement in equal parts with leaving them alone with the challenge. One of the boys had given up altogether and was sitting on his soccer ball trying to peel an orange he'd kept from snack time. Our coach called the kids around. Michaela got up and pouted her soccer ball up to the rest of the group. Matthew ran up to me on his way to the group and handed me his orange.

"Will you peel this for me?" he asked.

"Sure," I said.

I took the orange. The skin was slippery and slightly more yellow than orange. I thought about how hard it is to peel an orange. You have to dig your fingernail in far enough to get under the peel, but not so far as to puncture the flesh. Each piece is independent and seldom do you get a piece that makes the next one easier to peel. I poised the orange on my fingertips and tried to peel the first few pieces. Those are toughest; the skin is always the hardest and won't stay connected. I could feel bits of grainy peel under my fingernails. The kids started walking to lunch.

"Here you go," I said handing the orange back to Matthew, with a thick peel "pull tab" rising from the top. "I got it started; you should be able to take it from here."

### Things to Notice about this Essay

1. The author chooses an appropriately focused topic: a brief moment, a short pair of conversations in a single day of summer work.
2. A sense of the writer's talents as a writer and as a teacher are clear from this story.

3. The strategy is subtle, leaving most of the conclusions to the reader.
4. The essay is very short, banking on the reader to get to the point.
5. This essay uses a high-risk strategy. Will the reader conclude the author is coming to college to play soccer or to study child development? The author is counting on the story to carry the meaning and omits the “From this I have learned....” Conclusion. It works, but just barely.

### Sample 7

I used to be a pretty deep guy. I watched foreign films, read Nietzsche, and stayed up all night “contemplating jazz”. I was Jack Kerouac living in a fire hut on top of Desolation Peak. I was Gary Snyder seeking enlightenment in a Buddhist monastery in Thailand. I was Ken Kesey, Jimi Hendrix, and Timothy Leary all rolled up on one gigantic mess of pseudo-intellectual, adolescent, fancy boarding school beat poet wannabe. I was a moron.

I blew off my schoolwork not because I was lazy, but because I thought that schoolwork was shallow, too insignificant for me, the vivacious intellectual, the dharma bum, the Zen lunatic wanderer. How could my teachers expect me to do their homework, when life around me was all so futile, so meaningless? I was sure that I was a tortured soul destined to lead a life full of angst and pain.

That was last fall, more than a year ago now. In February of last year, I left my hipster friends and their coffeehouse conversations behind, to move back to the suburbs of Philadelphia and my conservative, unhip public high school. Suburban Philadelphia is not the easiest place in the world to be sixties cool and stylish. There aren’t many smoke-filled coffeehouses or hippie wanderers. It’s clean here, upper middle class-you know, the Ford Explorer, Saturday evening Mass, country club for dinner scene. I came back to Philadelphia because it isn’t all that “hip,” because there is nothing “profound” to do. I came home to get myself together. It was time to grow up.

I’m not as cool as I used to be. I never do anything very exciting or off the wall, at least not by my old standards. My friends from boarding school have for the most part become nothing more than distant memories. They’re all off in New York City or Mexico pretending to work on their spirituality, but really just partying their lives away. I stay home a lot. I’m at the library a couple of nights a week. I read, I write letters, I do some painting.

Last weekend, I watched *The Color Purple* with my mom, collected some weather data for a chemistry project, and had a tea party with my little sister. I’ve been spending time with the people I met in my high school production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, too. I feel balanced; I feel like myself. I no longer want to tend bar in Tangiers or meditate in Sri Lanka . . . all right, maybe I do, but not right now. For so long, I wanted to be other people, to be a cultural icon, a legend in my own time. But in reality, I’m nothing like Keith Richards. Honestly, I’m a little scared of sex and drugs. I worry about pimples, whether my parents are still happily married, where I’m going to be next year.

I came home, I grew up, I got my life back together. I’m still trying to find a balance, but I no longer feel like a reckless child. I was sure that I could get away from myself by just pretending that I was someone else. But right now, I’m not looking to be “on the road”. I’m pretty happy being right where I am.

### Things to Notice about This Essay

1. The story this writer tells seems sincere. It explains things from his transcript: a change of schools, improving grades.
2. The essay expects the reader to know all the references here to people (Gary Snyder, Keith Richards) and literature (*On the Road*, *Dharma Bums*, the line from poet Allen Ginsberg about “contemplating jazz”). The writer has a real depth of knowledge, which is good, but in some of these references, he may be expecting too little but in some of these references, he may be expecting a little too much from the reader . . . who won’t be 17.
3. The essay has a clear focus (“It was time to grow up”), extensive use of specifics and descriptive details, and a strong sense of a writer who has thought about his life experiences.
4. The essay doesn’t follow a traditional organization pattern and there are a few liberties with word choice and spelling (“wannabe”). A bit of a “risk”, this essay does match a writer who himself has taken chances. He tells his story with *grace* and conviction.

### Sample 8

As a seventeen year old, I don't yet have the experience or vision to know exactly what I want to accomplish. What I hope college will do for me is to broaden my base of knowledge with a solid liberal arts education. I would like to have the power to explore Drake's equation for extraterrestrial life while at the same time analyzing the similes used in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Or maybe I could investigate the applications of integral calculus or the themes of self-sacrifice in Shakespeare. From the combination of courses I decide to take, I expect to find one or two true passions that I can extract from the rest and then expand my knowledge exponentially in that field.

While I am working towards an academic concentration, I would like to focus my athletic efforts on swimming. At Springfield High, my intense training in swimming is interrupted every winter by my commitment to the basketball team. I am confident that concentrating solely on swimming will enable me to improve my past performances and times. If I could post a University record at Blodgett Pool and also find those one or two academic passions, I will have attained what I wanted from Princeton. And I am hopeful that in combining and completing these goals, I will have given something back to the school.

### Things to Notice about This Essay

1. The writer's use of specific topics from a liberal arts curriculum suggests that she has thought about what's going to go on in college (Drake, Virgil, calculus, Shakespeare). Weaker sentences are those lacking specifics (Sentence 2: "broaden my base of knowledge with a solid liberal arts education". Final sentence: "combining and completing these goals, I will have given something back to the school").
2. The writer is honest about her plans and her inability to predict a future at least four years away. But she is also positive about what she isn't sure of, emphasizing the future possibilities rather than her indecision.
3. It's a good idea to show a familiarity with the buildings and programs of the school to which you're applying. But if you write several essays like this one, be sure to proofread carefully. Isn't Blodgett Pool at Harvard?

### Sample 9

I knew I was going to Pittsburgh to play in a tournament. I didn't know I would be visiting Houston, Pennsylvania between matches. A rural suburb twenty miles outside the city's industrial hub, Houston is my father's hometown.

His family, he says, was "dirt poor" and barely able to sustain the house we found still standing—tired of living, it seemed and shedding its blue paint. My father pointed to a street corner blanketed with scattered sections of a local paper: "It was there . . . right there . . . where I stood and looked around me and saw that my future was contained in this town. It was painful to think of leaving. That street corner was the center of my universe." My father was the first person in his family—the first person in the little mining town—to go to college. As my father drove me along the unpaved back roads, he tried to find messages and axioms in the half-century old tale, but they did not answer the chain of questions jerked along by my consciousness: *How did he get out? Why did he come back? Why did he want to bring me here? Can I be as proud of my life as he is of his? What do I have to accomplish to gain such satisfaction? Do I have to do it soon?*

His stories stacked on top of each other like books on a desk. Each anecdote was another volume from his childhood and I was struggling to keep up with the reading. We passed the old house six times before he was ready to separate himself from Houston this time. The children playing outside the house tried to examine us through the tinted glass of our rented car and I shifted uncomfortably in my bucket seat. What opportunities did they have? What would I do with mine?

"Dad, these people are going to call the police if we keep circling the block."

Back at our hotel in Pittsburgh, I shouldered my racquet bag and followed my father up the staircase to our room. On each step, I tried to plant my foot exactly where he had put his.

### Things to Notice about This Essay

1. The organization is basically narrative. The writer's insights and reflections are incorporated into the story of her visit to Houston, Pennsylvania.

2. The writer does not tell the reader what this experience means. It's a risk, but she assumes we will figure out the connection between her father's experiences and her own. The italicized section in the middle guides the reader in understanding the end.
3. The writer supplies the details needed to create a picture of the place. The use of realistic dialogue adds credibility.
4. The essay tells only a small story, but it reveals the writer's ability both to think about her own experiences and to understand the experiences of other, different people.

### Sample 10

*Finding Nemo* is playing every hour on the hour this week. The theater teems with ornery, hyperactive kids for the half hour before each show. We have thirty minutes between each surge to sweep the floors of the concession stand before the next wave arrives to plead with their parents for four-dollar plastic buckets of junk food.

For \$4.75 an hour after taxes (a little more than one of those buckets costs), it isn't the best summer job and it only feels like the worst when *Finding Nemo* is playing. Usually we have plenty of time between shows to sweep up popcorn and replenish cups, buckets, and lids from the strangely-shaped cupboards underneath the counter where you have to grope blindly while on your knees. It's even more exciting when looking for the vats of simulated butter, which leave ominous oil-and-artificial-flavoring cakes on the bottom of the shelves. I used to order "butter topping" with my movie popcorn. After one day of pouring vats of it into the heating and dispensing machine, I decided I could never order it again.

I wish I could say it has been an educational experience, that it has made me a better person, or that for whatever reason I am secretly Forrest Gump. But the truth is that I spent the summer in an air conditioned theater with free movies to earn enough money to pay for gas. And during the summer, that's all that matters in a teenager's world.

### Things to Notice About This Essay

1. Asked to write about his summer activities, this writer tells the truth about his job in a clever and entertaining way.
2. There is no great lesson being taught but still the essay offers a clear focus-what he did last summer-and specifics that make the experience vivid and memorable to the reader.
3. The writer uses irony in the contrast of his wages and the popcorn purchases. He uses humor in explaining his recent decision to swear off "butter topping." Small touches like this are just enough (he's not applying to clown college).
4. Although the writer says he hasn't learned anything at the movies, his essay suggests that he thought carefully about his experience and can write about it clearly and with wit.

### Sample 11

I come from a country that is economically oppressed, a country where speaking against the government could cost one his or her life. There is no established government. "Survival of the fittest" is the regulation that we live by. There is no law enforcement, no government to complain to, and no police to call to one's rescue when one is being robbed or attacked.

The average Haitian only completes high school if he or she is fortunate. There exist circumstances in which a student has to leave school to work to care for their family even though work opportunities are insufficient. Times get harder and more unbearable as days go by. People get killed for no fixed reason, food becomes limited, and more and more children are getting ill.

My family consisted of eight people, all living on the second floor of a three-story house that included only two bedrooms. My sister and I slept in the same bed and in the same bedroom as my mother and two aunts. Paying the rent was difficult, for no one in the family was employed.

My grandmother left for the United States in 1988 when I was two years old. Since her arrival in America, she has stayed at someone's house. She was not yet familiar with the language, so it was difficult for her to find a job. She worked as a seamstress at home where she would make dresses for people and get paid, but that was not enough to establish her goal, which was to get her family here in America. Later, she worked as a housekeeper for five years; however, that job was also not sufficient. Knowing that she had children and grandchildren back in her native country, my grandma was determined to do everything in her power to take us out of our misery and bring us here to the land of opportunity.

Although my grandmother was going through harsh and difficult times, like finding transportation for work back and forth in the terrible weather, not being able to communicate with others, or being kicked out, she never forgot about us in Haiti. She would pay our house rent and send money for our schooling and for food. Also she filed for citizenship on our account, so it could be a quicker process of coming to the United States. After seven long years we were able to come to the U.S. November 28, 1995 was such an emotional and joyous day for the entire Joseph family.

There is nothing more that I want in this world than to thank my grandmother and truly show her how important she is to me. She is an exceptional, strong, and independent woman. As of now I am doing my best to attend a four-year college. My love for the community has influenced my career choice. I have resolved in my heart that no matter what I do I must be capable of providing assistance for others. Caring for others has always been my passion and going into a medical field or health profession is what I am striving for. The best way I see fit to give back to a community that has given so much to me is by becoming a nurse practitioner. Hopefully, I will be my grandmother's first grandchild to successfully graduate college. Being able to accomplish all my scholastic goals, I believe, I will not only honor my grandmother but also show her my appreciation for all the hard work she has done for me.

### **Things to Notice About This Essay**

1. This writer gives the reader a strong opening sentence that makes us want to keep reading.
2. The essay describes the author's family but from this the reader can derive a sense of the author's own determination and personality.
3. The essay is well organized, based on the chronology of her grandmother's story, and makes a clear connection between the events of the author's life and her future plans.
4. The essay is quite long; careful editing might keep the important parts and tell the story in fewer words.
5. We learn about the grandmother but it is not the grandmother's generosity, commitment, or love that matter; the reader wants to know more about the author of this essay herself. How did she come to the United States? When did she learn English? How does she live now?
6. What evidence proves that the grandmother's actions have shaped the author's life? You can't borrow someone else's suffering. All essays need proof for the claim; the author's own past (not planned future) actions are the missing pieces in this narration.

### **Sample 12**

A person who influenced me was Mrs. Baldwin, my best friend's mother. Mrs. Baldwin was always around whenever I went over to see Stacey. She was from Alabama and she always looked up from whatever she was making and said "Hey girl!" to me when I came in the kitchen door. I was shocked when my Mom told me that Mrs. Baldwin had cancer. I couldn't believe that anyone I knew, anyone I cared about, could be dying.

It was very hard for everyone as Mrs. Baldwin got sicker. I think her whole family was in shock. She went to the hospital for treatments and for chemotherapy but I knew that things weren't getting better.

Mrs. Baldwin died at home just before Thanksgiving last year. I still think about her often and I know things are completely different for her kids and her husband. Stacey and I don't ever talk about it but I can tell things have changed.

When Mrs. Baldwin died, I realized that people aren't forever. I know now that we all have to appreciate each other while we can. I think I've changed and I believe that Mrs. Baldwin has had a significant impact on my life. She gave me so much. She gave me a chance to laugh, to tell my stories, and to feel welcomed. She gave me the ability to be myself. Wherever I go, I know that Mrs. Baldwin will be watching over me, helping me to be happy.

### **Things to Notice About This Essay**

1. It is very hard to write about death. Poets and playwrights have been struggling—and often failing—for centuries. Think long and hard before you assign yourself the task of writing in a meaningful and fresh way about illness or death.

2. The essay has a clear focus: Mrs. Baldwin was important to the writer. A bit of specific evidence is offered: the friendly “Hey girl”. The reader wonders what other things Mrs. Baldwin did, what conversations they had, what actions created the feelings of warmth and closeness.
3. The writer uses a chronological organization and tells the story toward a conclusion (“I realized...”). The essay is organized, but the conclusion isn’t completely persuasive. Compare Samples 3 or 9, both of which tell more specific stories to support their conclusions. Remember to show rather than tell.
4. A final version of this essay should include revisions of “completely different,” “so much,” and “be myself”. The reader needs help to visualize what these phrases mean.
5. The writer may have used a spell-checking program, but errors like those in lines one and three show she didn’t proofread.

### **FINAL TIPS**

#### **Four Key Points About the Application Essay**

1. All the questions, in one way or another, ask the same thing: “Tell us about yourself.”
2. So that means you’re an authority on the topic.
3. The format is not unfamiliar; it is a regular essay with “you” as the subject.
4. It is not a punishment—it is a chance to add life to your application and to pitch yourself outside the numbers.

#### **Five Myths About Application Essays**

1. You have to write about something no one has ever written about before (unlikely and high risk).
2. There is a right answer to every question (there is only your right answer).
3. It is a good idea to be funny, clever or wacky (only if you think they are looking for funny, clever, or wacky applicants).
4. You have to do this alone (every writer asks for feedback, especially in high-stakes settings).
5. Your essay can get you in (only if other credentials also make you an interesting candidate).

#### **Four Common Mistakes**

1. Visualizing the admissions committee as a bunch of stuffy old professors in tweed jackets and then trying to write something that will impress them.
2. Trying so hard to be memorable that you end up being eccentric.
3. Writing an essay so predictable and generic that with fewer than three noun revisions (change “my Dad” to “my boss”; change “summer at the beach” to “summer in the mountains”; change the “Mastersingers” to the “varsity basketball team”), this essay could work for most of the senior class.
4. Forgetting that your counselor and your teachers are your allies and that even your parents know something about this topic.