

College Essay Excerpts

We understand that applicants are curious to see college essays from the past for context and inspiration, but reading college essay examples can actually be a slippery slope into writer's block and decision paralysis. The truth is that, just as each applicant is different, each admissions essay is unique in not only content, but also form. So, instead of reading every college essay you can find on the internet, we recommend reviewing this nifty markup we put together, in which we highlight all of the places these college essayists got it right.

Note that we haven't published any one essay in its entirety—some things are best left in a cloak of mystery, and we don't want you to be tempted to mimic an essay's structure, concept, or execution from beginning to end. These are meant to be loose references only! Observe and be inspired by each essay's superpowered strengths and keep it moving! What you have to say in your own essay is far more interesting than trying to sound like someone else, we promise—even if you haven't written it yet!

THE DONUT-EATING RUNNER

Essay Superpowers: Common topic infused with humor, creative timeline, swift action.

Flashback!

My mind wanders to a moment earlier in the month when, as I am ready to depart for an early morning run, my mother walks in the door with a box of donuts. Custard or sweat? At the time I chose custard. How could I have been so stupid?

Distinctive and clever voice.

...

Contextual dialogue – showcases sense of humor.

On the morning of the big run, I woke up at 4am to board the bus to the race. I chatted with my friend Gabe who hurt his knee a couple days earlier, and admitted to him that I had the jitters.

“At least you have both your legs,” he quipped. By the beginning of the race, my nerves were calm, and when the starting bell rang, I felt energized. After crossing the course's first bridge, I approached a sign plastered with a large number “10.” I couldn't believe I had already been running for 10 miles, but as I got closer to the sign, a small “k” came into focus. I hadn't been running for 10 miles, I had been running for 10 kilometers. Damn those Europeans. ...

Effective use of surprise and humor.



THE GRADUATION SPEAKER

Essay Superpowers: Expertly wielded mechanism, a strong voice and humor

Opening question draws the reader in

Remember that one time junior year, when you asked that girl out over text, and she responded that she was not really interested in dating right now? And then she told her friends all about your proposal and they laughed and laughed? And the following Saturday night you saw her at the movies with Stewart Schwartz while you were there with your mom? Remember that?

Details = HA!

Yeah, me neither.

Relatable tone

Now think of the time you tried out for the musical, even though Mike Ventura is a much better singer, and you got a lead role right alongside him? And hundreds of people came to watch you both shine on stage? Remember that?

Great detail! Says a lot about writer's sense of humor and humility.

We all do.

Commitment to community

...
Getting to know the class through my duties in office, I realized what incredible talent and ambition we have collected here at George Washington High School. When we see each other at our reunions five and ten and twenty years from now, I know we will talk about our research grants, the books we are writing, the kids we are teaching, and the people we are helping at our nursing jobs. We will talk about our children and our friends and the way we have impacted lives of other people. The many small blips on the road to our success will melt away. Remaining will be the things of real value. Those are the things we will share.

Doesn't only think about himself. Sees talent in others.

Under-scores his own values



THE NIKE JORDANS

Essay Superpowers: Surprising details and dialogue, vivid language.

The first time I was really puzzled by a question about my African origins I was shopping in a mall in Maryland. One of the sales clerks complimented me on my sneakers, asking me where I got them.

I told her that I bought them overseas in my country: Senegal. "They have Nike Jordans in Africa?" she asked me. She was surprised that I would be able to purchase the same products in Africa that are available in America.

...

Her reaction was not the last strange comment or inaccurate assumption I encountered during my adventures abroad. In a restaurant in Washington, D.C., I was waiting for my order when I revealed to the waitress that I was from Africa. She exclaimed, "Really? That's so cool. When I was younger the Lion King was my favorite movie." One man in Florida asked me how I managed to travel to the States, taking on an embarrassed shade of beet red after I said, "a plane!" And an old lady shared her regret of never experiencing a Safari, and was dumbfounded that I myself had never seen a giraffe or any other exotic animals. (I live in a bustling metropolis.) The comments and questions that came up most often were regarding my language and manner of speaking. Some people seemed surprised that I did not have an accent, considering it was my first time in the U.S. Others were just puzzled that I spoke French instead of "African."

...

While some people would have been offended by such questions and comments, I believe this dialogue is proof of a communication and knowledge gap rather than general insensitivity. Each bizarre inquiry and assumption taught me more about the deeply ingrained beliefs and false perceptions people have about my country – beliefs I can help adjust.

...

The more proactively curious we are about other people's backgrounds, the more informed and open-minded we become. Along the way, the most valuable thing we can do is show understanding for each other as we stumble along the road to world knowledge and cultural sensitivity – after all, who among us already knows it all?

Key contextual detail

Using dialogue to set up scenario

Great use of dialogue! Creates an "OMG what?!" moment for both writer and reader.

Clarifying detail

A tinge of sad, complex humor = a display of positivity

passion & purpose

Leaves reader with something to ponder.



WHAT MAKES A WOMAN

Essay Superpowers: Disarming honesty and depth, common topic treated with thoughtful and creative reflection.

Hilarious opener—sets expectation that writer ultimately turns on its head

Through my thirteen-year-old eyes, maturity was proportionate to cup size.

...

As her treatments continued, we found out that my mom would need to undergo a double mastectomy. She recognized that the physical transformation of her body was going to be drastic and that it would take some getting used to, but she also reassured me that nothing

Showcases relationship with mom

fundamental about her would change. This contradicted what I had come to believe – that the development of one's body was the primary

TURNING POINT

indicator of true womanhood. In the weeks that followed my mom's surgery, I came to understand that a woman is not defined by her physical traits. Seeing mom wear shirts that showed off her flat chest, I could tell that she was proud of herself for surviving cancer, and more importantly, had embraced her life-changing experience. I was incredibly proud of her, too.

Learning/growing moment

Caring, selflessness

...

At seventeen, I have a new understanding of what it means to be a woman.

While womanhood and adulthood can be hard to define, they are states characterized by far more than one's anatomy. Being a woman means making independent decisions and being confident in oneself. Being a woman is about understanding one's strengths and weaknesses, and recognizing the uphill battle one may face in a less-than perfect world.

Repetition builds momentum

Being a woman means not letting someone else define womanhood for you .

Bold, strong statement



IN THE CAR WITH MOM

Essay Superpowers: Focus on small moments, defining a relationship through dialogue.

*Opens w/
conversation
mapped
out through
dialogue -
sets the
scene*

“What did you dream about last night?” Mom asks me.

It is 5:25 a.m., and my mother is still in her pajamas, huddled in a big sweatshirt to combat the winter cold. She is barely awake, and though I am only slightly more alive, as we sit next to each other in the car, we feel a desire to engage.

“I was sliding down a laundry chute,” I tell her, “dodging these crazy obstacles to get to the end and see what was waiting for me.”

We sit together in silence for a moment.

“What did you dream about?” I ask in return.

*Funny, specific
detail*

“I was driving around with Prince Harry and Prince William, taking them for a sightseeing tour of New York; I have no idea why. I was probably thinking I had get up to drive you.”

“See, you are a born chauffeur,” I tease.

*Points to a playful
relationship*

...

In 2013 I passed my road test, and my whole routine changed. Communal conversation became personal reflection. Now, after practice I run through vocabulary words in my head alone, without a motherly prompt. I contemplate my future without side opinions. Most recently, I find myself thinking through my college options, all without my trusty sounding

*Warm
language*

*Reinforces
meaning
of relation-
ship*

board in the driver’s seat. Though her commentary comes less frequently and later in the day, I still know she will always tell me exactly what she thinks. There are moments when I feel lost without her in the morning.

Then I realize participating in those morning car rides was the ultimate form of preparation. Now I belong in the driver’s seat.

Great wordplay! Connects to rest of story, makes a clear declaration and leaves the reader with something to chew on.



THE BURGLAR FIGHTER

Essay Superpowers: Jumping into and sustaining the action, creative timeline that maintains interest

What an opener!

I was sleeping when the burglar broke into my house. His footsteps were incorporated into my dream, clomping to the rhythm as I ran around an imaginary baseball field. My little sister shook me awake after the house alarm had been roaring for about a minute; my parents were already at work. I shot out of bed and reached for my glasses before leaving my room, still clad in my sleepwear. I barely took two steps out of the bedroom when I spotted him at the top of the steps, just 15 feet from where I stood.

Great imagery

High-speed action!

...

Excellent use of internal monologue

“Who is this guy?” I thought. “He’s wearing his shoes in the house!”

...

*Surprising revelation!
Sets up exploration of main point*

The first question people ask me when I tell them this story is, “Were you scared?” I have been both surprised and reassured to find in retrospect that I truly was not afraid. From the moment I laid eyes on my dark-clad intruder, more than anything, I felt prepared to defend myself. ...



THE NATURE PAINTER

Essay Superpowers: Connecting the dots between disparate interests, detailed descriptions, metaphor/wordplay

Opening assumes the tone of a science paper – interesting & unexpected.

Scientists say providing an animal with access to tools can profoundly influence its future behavior. Without meerkats bringing scorpions to their young, their pups would never learn to kill their dangerous yet necessary food. But even when animals are born with instinct, sometimes nature relies on something—or someone—else to provide crucial tools and demonstrate their intended uses.

Great transition

Fun detail about the relationship

Uncle Andy was the first to bring me the tools and teachings of nature. When I was little, I followed him around my backyard, exploring and looking under rocks. For my fifth birthday, he hosted a “Bug Party” for my friends and me, arming us with butterfly nets and servings drinks over ice with plastic crickets frozen inside. Nature brought us together—it is how we bonded.

Colorful details

The tools of nature were further enhanced when my mother introduced paintbrushes, enriching my life with artful tools and creative thinking. From stamping to plaster, my mom walked me through her tools of expression, and I participated and mimicked. On family vacations, I pack watercolors, and together we head into the woods to capture wildlife-rich scenes on paper. Because of my experience, art and nature are synonymous.

MAIN POINT

Great ANALOGY

Just as peacocks display their vivid tail feathers to attract attention, I instinctively wanted to use art to draw attention to an important cause: sustaining populations of threatened animals.

Return to opening

Though I will leave the scorpion-gathering to the meerkats, I will continue to be a person who introduces others to paintbrushes and crickets frozen in ice in the hopes of inspiring exploration and encouraging human curiosity, one of nature’s greatest wonders.

Statement of purpose and future motivation

