

COLLEGE ESSAY GUIDE



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The Task at Hand: Personal Statements, UC Essays, & Other Character Supplements

“The scariest moment is always just before you start.”
— Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*

You’ve been asked to sum up the “you factor” —years’ worth of fundamentally experiential existence—into a pithy essay upon which it seems your entire collegiate future is predicated. No pressure.

OF COURSE this feels daunting and near impossible, but there are a few truths you must know before you go any further.

1. **You are not alone.**
2. **You have something perfect to say.**
3. **You will say it perfectly.**

The primary purpose of these essays is to color your application with humanity: it’s where you get to be YOU, not simply an impersonal conglomerate of scores, activities, and grades.

The you-ness is where we’ll begin, and the you-ness is where we’ll end. Before your head begins swimming with the anxiety of identifying potential topics, take a deep breath.

There’s a process to uncovering your personal writing perfection, and it’ll go something like this:

1. **Brainstorm:**

This is to get your creative juices flowing and to help you uncover what it is you’d really like to say about yourself.

- The exercises are designed to reveal patterns, traits, and potential narratives that will prove integral to powerful writing.
- They’re also intended to get you into the * zone *. Writing, like all skills, needs to be practiced. It won’t feel easy at first, especially because in all likelihood you won’t be used to writing about yourself.

2. **Drafts:**

This is not a one-shot deal. This is a several shot deal, at the very least. You’ll write many drafts, there will be lots of revision and discussion, and it’s imperative that you get real comfortable with this process.

3. Revision

This is where we'll begin the process of re-examining. Does that word mean what you think it means? Do your sentences convey your meaning? Are you being concise and illustrative simultaneously? Does that idea really serve your purpose?

Note: Revision isn't just about fixing commas and correcting passive sentences. It's also about learning to be a reflective, critical, and thoughtful thinker. In order to best convey our ideas, we have to consider how they'll be received by a wide range of people. We also have to ensure that the essay doesn't depend on someone knowing its author: like anything, a thought can come off differently than intended without the benefit of knowing the speaker's personality.

4. Finalizing

Now we polish. Word count, typos, dotting "i"s and crossing "t"s. The heavy lifting should have been completed in phase three—this is just proofing!

Before we go any further, we should clarify **The Big Fat Truth** about your Personal Statement Essay(s).

It is not about what you do or did or have done. It is **not** an opportunity for you to pick an experience you think makes you sound cool or college-worthy and narrate.

It's about who you are. Essentially, it's a quality we're trying to communicate, not a story. The story is simply a vehicle to convey the quality, and, quite frankly, sometimes the simplest and humblest stories are the most effective conveyors of your truth.

With this in mind, we're going to call the conveyance of this quality your **thesis**: the fundamental trait you'd like to communicate to colleges.

Our Essay Objective

Our essays are thesis driven, not activity driven

We need to repeatedly ask ourselves: "what does this say about me?"

We don't want them to say "This is a thing I do or did"

We want them to say: This is who I am.

This is what I've learned. This is how I show up.

Finally, it's important to bear in mind how the essay serves the rest of your application. Is it offering important balance? Is it filling the humanity void? Does it speak to your youth? Or does it simply elaborate upon an activity we've mentioned elsewhere?

Writing Exercises: Let's Warm Up

“A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.”
— Thomas Mann, *Essays of Three Decades*

But I'm not a writer! Join the club, friend. Writing is a skill, not a talent, and it takes consistent practice and honing of that skill to become a confident writer. You'd never jump into a soccer game or belt a solo on-stage without warming up first; you won't write your perfect essay without warming up either.

Before we begin, let's get clear on the terms we'll be referencing throughout the process.

“Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”
— Anton Chekhov

1. Imagery

Chances are you've been hearing the phrase “show not tell” since 4th grade. What does it actually mean? Well, it all has to do with imagery, or using words/phrases that evoke one or more of the reader's five senses.

Descriptive writing is important in your personal essays; it paints a more vivid picture of whatever you're trying to convey.

Example:

- **Before:** I heard mom frying bacon in the kitchen, and the sun had already woken me up.
- **After:** I awoke to the sizzling crack of bacon landing deliciously in mom's signature tar-black cast iron pan. The sunlight, gold and soft on the familiar peeling walls of my childhood bedroom, basked the stacked textbooks in an uncharacteristically warm glow.

2. Diction

This is another imperative factor, especially when you're pressed for words with constrictive word counts. Choosing the right phrasing can be a painstaking challenge, so learning how to be concise—and how to say things in a creative or different way—is an important part of the process.

Example:

- **Before:** “We always work really hard together as a team to accomplish all our goals”
- **After:** “Our collaborative teamwork is the key to our success.”

3. Tone and Voice

Are you funny? Nostalgic? Determined? Humble? Grave? Determining your tone is imperative to conveying meaning, and it's important, too, that your tone match the content of your essay. Do not be afraid to sound like yourself. **Actually, be afraid NOT to sound like yourself.** This essay is the epitome of YOU. Own it.

Example:

“Is it bigger than a breadbox?”

“Yes.”

I have always been tall, decidedly tall. Yet, my curiosity has always surpassed my height. Starting at a young age, I would ask countless questions, from “How heavy is the Earth?” to “Where does rain come from?” My curiosity, displayed in questions like these, has truly defined me as a person and as a student. Therefore, it is not surprising that I became transfixed the first time I played 20Q (the electronic version of Twenty Questions). Somehow, a little spherical device guessed what I was thinking. The piece of technology sparked my curiosity and instilled in me a unique interest in 20Q. This interest would later reveal valuable character traits of mine while also paralleling various facets of my life.¹

4. Figurative Language

Metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, alliterative notes... there's a time and a place. Do not litter your essay with literary devices—sprinkle when appropriate.

- **Metaphor:** Winning the election was a mountain I'd never thought I'd be able to climb.
- **Simile:** The lake, like a mirror, reflected the stars back with the precision of infinity.
- **Personification:** The birds, mocking me with their chirpy laughter, knew I wasn't cut out for camping.
- **Hyperbole:** The walls came crashing down around me.
- **Alliteration:** The creative cacophony that followed is hard to describe.

¹ Sample taken from an introduction provided by Johns Hopkins' admissions blog

Warm Up Exercises

“And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.”

— Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*

Exercise I

Describe a time when you enjoyed an experience outdoors. You may not use the “to be” verb at all in your writing (is/are/was/were/am). (5 minutes)

Exercise II

Describe a particularly delicious meal with an emphasis on imagery description. You must:

- Appeal to all five senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell)
- Use one metaphor (a comparison that doesn’t use “like” or “as” i.e. “the spaghetti was a mountain”) and one simile (the spaghetti was like a mountain). (5-7 minutes)

Exercise III

What’s your favorite subject in school and why? You must explain using only monosyllabic words (words with one syllable, i.e. “I like the class where we learn life forms and cells”). (5-7 minutes)

Let's Brainstorm

Answer **ALL** of the next 15 questions. (Don't worry about length. It might take you a few sentences, it might take you a paragraph. Don't write a full essay.)

Fill in the blank:

1. When I'm sad, you can usually find me...
2. I'm my best self when...
3. The best class I ever took was... because...
4. It's super inspiring when ...
5. The hardest thing I've ever had to do was...

Short Answer:

1. What are your "words to live by," and what's an example of a time you lived by them?
2. What's your favorite thing about your best friend?
3. Describe a time you were proud of yourself.
4. Though you likely have lots of ideas about your future, what's the one quality you'll always strive to embody? Why?
5. Tell about a time you made a mistake. How did you feel? What happened? What did you learn?
6. Describe a time you were served a slice of humble pie.
7. When you're in a group, what's your role? How do you approach a problem?
8. What do you think your parents would say is your best quality?
9. What would they say is your most annoying quality?
10. What are two goals you've accomplished, and how did you accomplish them?

Pick **THREE** of the following and answer them

Write about....

1. a time the joke was on you
2. a time you failed spectacularly and/or succeeded beyond your expectations (maybe it was the same time!)
3. a teacher you hated who turned out to be good for you
4. a lesson you learned that you could never have learned in school
5. a time **YOU** were the teacher
6. A ritual: what's something you do every day/week/month that perhaps you've never thought about before? When did it start? Why do you do it?
7. a hard lesson learned from watching the example of your parent/sibling/friend
8. a time you really, really wanted something but couldn't have it
9. a time you surprised yourself with your bravery/cowardice

Feeling Stuck? | M. Reynolds, Tufts Admissions | Dec. 17th, 2017

A few years ago, some colleagues and I decided to tackle the Tufts supplement ourselves in order to (a) better understand the challenging task of capturing oneself in 600 words; and (b) give our applicants more examples of supplemental essays that work well. I don't know that I really accomplished the second task, but I do know that I learned something important about brainstorming a topic. Initially, I had a tough time coming up with what to write. "What makes you happy?" I thought. Well, what makes me happy is my family, my friends, and the beach... none of this is groundbreaking stuff. Most people can say their family, friends, and the beach make them happy (if you don't like the beach I will never understand you). So I have nothing to write about, everyone else is cooler than me, and I'll never get into college....

Now, maybe (hopefully) you don't make that same mental leap because you are sane and have perspective, but even so I imagine you may be facing a similar roadblock right about now. You're looking for an essay topic—something that is both real and sets you apart—and you're stuck. Maybe it's your last supplemental essay and you've run out of ideas. Maybe there's a topic you want to tackle and you just can't think of the angle that makes it yours. Believe me, I've been there.

In my frustration I vented to my roommate, and in this moment I discovered something I wish to share with you. "Gah!" I shouted from behind my laptop. "I don't know what makes me happy! It's all the normal stuff that make everyone happy! Ali, what makes me happy?!" Without hesitation she rolled her eyes and said: "Ugh. Games."

Famously this particular roommate hated games, hence the eye roll. I believed this to be a personal attack on my lifestyle, but I suppose that's not important for this blog post. Immediately I had a topic I could run with. More than most, I turn everything into a game – I love organized fun, my mind relishes the opportunity to strategize when stakes are low, and I really enjoy getting to know people through collaborative efforts involving boards and cards and declarations of "Yahtzee!"

All of a sudden I was typing away. I had an idea that felt personal, I felt it was a true window into my life and the way I think, and most importantly I was having fun writing it.

My advice to you is this: Look up from your computer. Get out of your own head for a second. Ask a friend or a family member what they think of when they think of you. Their answer may surprise you or it may not, but it will definitely give you an option for an essay topic that's better than the one you've been thinking about in circles for the last four hours while you stare at a blank Word document.

Talk to other people. Sometimes a conversation – out loud, face-to-face – shakes an idea loose that would otherwise remain crammed behind all the stress and doubt that this process often fosters.

Parent Questionnaire

1. Describe a time your child surprised you with his/her courage/determination/thoughtfulness.

2. What are three words you'd use to describe your child? Explain.

3. Over the past few years, in what ways have you seen your child grow?

4. Over the past few years, what's a particular challenge your child overcame? Describe the experience and how he/she worked through it.

5. When do you find your child is his/her happiest?

Drafting Process

“One day I will find the right words, and they will be simple.”
— Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

Selection

The time has come. Look through your brainstorms, your notes, our parents’ notes, and identify common themes or ideas that really stand out. What qualities about yourself are coming up the most? Which **traits** seem most meaningful and authentic?

Make a list here:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Once you’ve identified the quality/qualities you’re working with, then you can begin to consider how best to convey that quality. Your brainstorms should help you determine which anecdote(s) will best serve this thesis.

Some things to consider as you choose:

1. Does your school have supplements? If so, are there any anecdotes you’re “saving” because they best fit a supplemental question? Let’s rule those out.
2. Are you choosing an anecdote because you think it’ll be most impressive, or are you choosing it because it best fits your thesis? Though it’s sometimes hard to leave our “big stories” behind, the best personal statements come from authentic portrayals of ourselves.
3. Is your anecdote something that lends itself nicely to storytelling? If not, it might not be suited for this task. You’re going to need to create a compelling and memorable narrative, and while it’s possible to do that with any content, some anecdotes may prove less rich than others.

But before you go any further, consider:

- How do you feel about your anecdote? Does it excite you? Move you? Are you looking forward to writing about it? If you don’t “feel,” chances are the reader won’t either.

“No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.”
— Robert Frost

Common App Essay Prompts

Here are the Common App's prompts, which are fundamentally the same each year and always have 650-word limit. They may inspire a certain direction, or you may opt for #7. There is no "right" choice.

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Starting Your First Draft

1. **“Done not good”** — This is not “it.” Do not be overcome by the pressure of producing the perfect narrative in one fell swoop. Just get the words on the page. The most important thing is to get the content down and see what you have (“done”); the “good” will come later.
 - As you begin, write your thesis at the top of your page. Do not let yourself lose sight of what you’re trying to convey.
2. **Be yourself, sound like yourself — You are banned from the thesaurus.** Successful essays sound like their authors, not like high school students trying to produce what they think is college level writing. Simplicity is best.
 - If you’re funny, be funny! If you’re not, that’s ok! Just be yourself. Pretend like you’re writing a letter to your favorite teacher—the one you feel most comfortable with—about a meaningful experience. You have nothing to prove; you only have to be yourself.
3. **Interesting writing has several components** —No need to worry about all of them being perfect in your first draft, but keep in mind that you’ll need to incorporate stylistic and literary elements as you move through the process. Consider:
 - **Structure:** Are you beginning “in medias res,” or in the middle of your story’s action? Are you offering some background first? What will the purpose of your last paragraph be? Etc.
 - **Tone:** What feeling do you want your reader to have while reading your essay?
 - **Imagery:** Don’t forget—use all five senses to help your reader feel like s/he is part of the story you’re telling.
 - **Detail:** The small details are what make your narrative personal. The book on the counter, the tear in the shirtsleeve, the look on the woman’s face...
 - **The Takeaway Factor:** What are you left with at the end? What does your thesis + anecdote offer the reader? Humility, humor, growth, positivity?

Revision, Rules, and Next Drafts

“Substitute 'damn' every time you're inclined to write 'very;' your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.”

— Mark Twain

Step 1: Content Revision + Draft 2

Now it's time to get critical.

- Does that sentence really serve my purpose?
 - Does that paragraph reinforce my thesis?
 - Have I said everything I need to say concisely?
 - Is my opening interesting, my conclusion powerful?
 - Is the structure conducive to conveying my anecdote powerfully? Does it offer the most impact as is, or should I adjust paragraph placement?
 - Are there interesting details? Is the language interesting? Have I used imagery and metaphor where appropriate? Have I set the scene, have I conveyed myself in an authentic light?
1. Consider these questions and go through your narrative on your own and make any adjustments you see fit.
 2. Have a 2nd reader, likely your counselor, give it his or her first go. Be prepared! Sometimes feedback is hard to receive, especially if you're emotionally invested in what you've written, but this is an integral part of the process for all writers. What made sense in your head may not come across on paper, and that is what your readers are for!

Draft 2 should incorporate these content related comments. It will still be rough in terms of grammar/mechanical issues.

Step 2: Heavy Revision (grammar, language, etc) + Draft 3

1. You are accountable for your Test Prep English/Writing Language Material

- **Commas:**
 - Are they used with conjunctions to join two independent clauses?
 - Are they used to separate dependent and independent clauses?
 - Are you consistent with your “oxford comma” when listing?
 - Are your appositives used correctly?

Sample:

 - **I went to the beach with my friends, and had dinner with grandma.**
I went to the beach with my friends and had dinner with grandma.
I went to the beach with my friends, and I had dinner with grandma.
- **Semicolons, Em Dashes, Colons**
 - Are you varying your structure by using these options to join independent clauses?
 - Are your Em Dashes (—) Hyphens (-)? They can’t be. Are they touching the words on either side of them—like this? They need to be.
 - Are you using semicolons with conjunctions like “and” or “but”? You can’t.
- **Also:**
 - Have you used “being” as a verb? Don’t.
 - Are you using passive voice? Rearrange to make your language active.
 - Are you offering the most concise (this means brief without sacrificing meaning!) language possible?
Example: “The best teacher who ever taught me in history was Mr. Bob” vs. “Mr. Bob was the best history teacher.”
- **Subject Verb/Subject Pronoun Agreement**
 - Make sure your subjects/verbs and subjects/pronouns match!

2. Vary your sentences

Not all your sentences should sound the same or have the same structure. See below for clarification.

Ex. 1: While I was at school, I ran into my friend, Sarah. Whenever I see Sarah, she's always nice to me. Even though Sarah and I lost touch after 8th grade, we're still friendly.

All three of the above sentences begin with a dependent clause. When you read them, you can hear the repetitive rhythm that comes from this kind of repetition.

Ex. 2: Horses are my passion. I have been riding horses since I was five. They always make me feel better. Horseback riding is my happy place.

All of the above sentences are simple sentences—they have one independent clause. This, too, is repetitive.

Ex. 3: I like to spend my time on the basketball court. I feel that basketball teaches valuable life lessons. I think I'll play basketball for the rest of my life.

Sometimes you can make a stylistic choice to begin all sentences in a paragraph the same way—this is called “anaphora,” and you’ll see a purposeful example of it in the samples attached. If you’re not going to make it a choice, i.e. **if you just have three sentences in a row beginning with “I,” you’ll need to vary them.**

3. Repetition

Are you saying the same words over and over again? Change it up!

Before: The competition was the first time in my life that I felt completely unprepared. All the months of preparation that I had done before the competition felt completely pointless.

After: For the first time in my life, I felt utterly unprepared; it seemed the work I'd done to ready myself for the competition was in vain.

4. Are you using “you”?

Don't. It's usually best to switch back to the first person.

Before: You can always tell a freshman by the lost expression on her face.

After: I can always tell a freshman by the lost expression on her face.

OR

One can always tell a freshman by the lost expression on her face.

5. Finally, Diction

I. Adverbs:

“The road to hell is paved with adverbs.”
— Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*

This may be hard for you to accept. You have likely depended on adverbs for a long time to help you sound passionate, enthusiastic, or interesting. But the cold, hard truth is that adverbs dilute the potency of your writing.

Banned:

- Very
- Really
- Truly
- Honestly
- Completely
- Always (banned most of the time—the irony of this is not lost)
- Incredibly
- So
- AND MORE!

Question: What about adverbs that modify an action with emotion, like “anxiously”?

Fair enough, but chances are there’s a more interesting way to describe anxiously, using imagery and powerful descriptors. Why not do that instead?

Before: I opened the letter anxiously.

After: Hands trembling, I opened the letter.

Of course, there are exceptions. Be mindful and use adverbs sparingly.

II. Words that mean nothing + Superlative/Hyperbole

“Cut out all the exclamation points. An exclamation point is like laughing at your own joke.”
— F. Scott Fitzgerald

Superlatives are the exclamation points of the language world (but don’t use exclamation points, either, unless they’re really witty and important). It can be tempting to use these words to convey the extent to which we feel, but they end up meaningless because of the extent to which they’re overused.

Banned:

- Incredible — this means “unable to be believed”
- Amazing — this means “causing great surprise or wonder”
- Obsessed
- I would love nothing more than to
- The best experience of my life
- The most interesting thing I’ve ever done
- Life-changing
- A dream come true

Before: Attending Boston College would be a truly incredible opportunity for me, and I’m very excited about my upcoming tour.

After: The opportunity to attend Boston College would enable me to pursue my goals in a diverse community of committed learners and future world-changers. I look forward to witnessing this community first-hand when I tour next month.

III. Word Count — Cutting it down

1. See if there are prepositions you can cut down on:
 - The team of players → the team, the players, the soccer team
2. Delete superfluous words
 - Adverbs are usually a good place to start, but also repetitive adjectives, etc. Think test prep! Concise is always best.
 - It was such a moving and emotional experience →
It was ~~such~~ a moving ~~and~~ ~~emotional~~ experience

Supplements

**“We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.”
— Anaïs Nin**

Many schools require unique, shorter supplemental essays as part of their applications. Before beginning your supplements for any one school, be sure to compile all the supplements you have to complete so you can see where the questions of various schools overlap.

Your supplements are a great opportunity to round yourself out—to cover the ground you missed in your personal statement, to elaborate on the tweet-length responses on the Common App’s activity section, and to convey your thoughtful interest in your schools.

Importantly, the supplements also offer an important exercise in reflection: they can help you get clear on what made something meaningful, memorable, or impactful. They’re best served concise and with a side of creativity. Don’t fall prey to formulaic, generic, or overly-dramatic responses.

Importantly, before you go any further, remember what we said about adverbs and diction: No. Begging. No. Superlatives. No. Meaningless, Over-The-Top Words.

Language is your great ally! Use her.

1. Why X School?

The “Why X?” question can feel overwhelming, and students often have no idea where to begin. It’s a hard question, especially if your first-instinct answer is “because I’ve always wanted to go there!” It’s a challenge to turn that enthusiasm into a concrete examination of your interest.

The other problem with Why X is that students are often frantic to figure out what the school “wants to hear.” The answer? They want to hear your honesty. They aren’t looking for a regurgitation of their website highlights; they’re looking for your specific, individual, amazingness impressions.

The *other* other problem with Why X is the word limit... or lack thereof. Some schools give you 100 words, some give you 300, and some give you 650. Often, none of these word limits feels like the sweet spot, and chances are you’ll have to adjust your approach to this question quite a bit based on school/word limit.

Brainstorming

- Use your notes from your Campus Tours to help you uncover unique specifics to the “youness” of your experience with the school
 - Was there something you noticed all student ambassadors kept repeating?
 - Did you witness an interaction that you think speaks to the school’s vibes?
 - Was there a set-up (housing, academic, common room library) that struck you in some meaningful way?
 - Was there anything else that particularly inspired you?

- Make a list of the following from information you’ve researched on the school’s website (or elsewhere):
 - The school’s ethos (presented on the website)
 - A professor/course that interests you
 - An initiative on campus that resonates with your passions
 - 2-4 Non-academic pursuits the school offers that speaks to your interest
 - Any abroad/internship/experiential opportunities you’d like to pursue

- Approaches
 - The singular element approach
 - This works well for the shorter word limit Why Xes—is the one, overarching element that you think embodies the school? See the Why Tufts? sample provided for a great example of this.

 - The multi-element approach
 - It’s hard to cram 10 things you love about a school into a 650 word essay, let alone one that’s 300 or 100 words! Choose a few elements from your brainstorm that you think really speak to your reasons for applying—do not choose the elements you think the school will be most impressed by. Authenticity is the key. If you can’t authentically articulate why you want to go, it’s probably not the right school

 - What to avoid
 - “USC has always been my lifelong dream, and if I were fortunate enough to attend, I would be over the moon.”
 - “Living in Manhattan really draws me to NYU—having such an incredible city at my fingertips would be amazing.”
 - “My dad went to Yale, and I’ve never imagined anything else for myself.”

II. Other Supplements + UC Essays

Your other supplements will provide an opportunity for you to expand, explore, and explain. They'll range anywhere from 1 to 1,000 words, and they'll vary greatly based on school.

For these, use what you know personal statements and how to effectively use language: **it's ongoing balance between descriptive and concise, thorough and simple.**

They, too, will need a **thesis statement**: what's the purpose of what you're writing—what are you trying to convey?

- Tips:
 - **Be mindful of balance:** Use your supplements to explore previously unexamined elements of your application. Do not repeat anecdotes or thesis statements conveyed elsewhere.
 - **Don't be afraid to be yourself:** These shorter pieces are often a creative opportunity to use tone and voice! Have fun with them—especially if you've presented a more serious side on your personal statement.

Personal Narrative Samples & Critical Reading Exercise

Critical Reading Exercise

For each of the four personal statements in this section, do the following.

1. Annotate for details or language that stands out to you
2. Map out the structure of each: how does it begin? How does it end?
3. How would you identify the tone and voice of each?
4. Note any imagery or interesting descriptions.
5. Note any stylistic choices you notice.
6. What do you like about them? What are you not into?
7. Work backwards: What is the thesis of each? Write the main message—the essential quality that the student is conveying about him/herself—at the top.

Sample 1

My first week of my internship was not what I expected. I waltzed in on the first day expecting to immediately settle into the perfect routine that I have in school, that I would find my natural place on day one, but this was not to be the case. I broke a slide, spilled tryptone on the floor, killed fifty baby worms, sprayed ethanol at a PhD candidate, struggled to remove things from the sterilization oven and burned myself on the freezer. I was so nervous of getting lost if I left the building that I ate an Einstein Bagel every day for lunch to avoid leaving. I wanted to familiarize myself with the lab's published research papers to impress my peers with my knowledge, however I found myself turning to Google every few lines to look up something new; we hadn't learned the functions of protein AIR-2 or the definition of aneuploidy in my high school biology class. I thought it would be exciting to be the only high schooler in the lab, but I quickly realized that my age formed a barrier, though I would learn later a surmountable one, between me and my coworkers. The lab worked like a machine and I felt like a misfit part.

The lab was full of microbiologists striving to be at the top of their fields and when I walked in the door each day of that first week it all seemed so intimidating. How could I properly assist them and even help them advance their research when I felt like I was simply trying not mess anything up? I came into this position ready to learn but this did not feel like school. There were no friends my age, no desks aligned in perfect rows and no work sheets. This was a different type of learning, so much more hands on; it felt unfamiliar. Each afternoon my supervisor, Amanda, would come by to look over my shoulder and check my work for the day; as she approached my desk I'd feel the butterflies in my stomach start to flutter. As she'd walk away I'd take a deep breath and wait for her return the next day.

As Amanda came over after our first major assessment together, I couldn't stop tapping my foot. I thought back to all the times that I made small mistakes and how they could add up to failure. When she smiled and showed the results to everyone, I realized that I had successfully completed an important task that would benefit my colleagues research. I wasn't simply washing flasks or sterilizing water; what I had done was meaningful. I was relieved that I hadn't messed with her experiment, but more than that I was proud at my accomplishment. Sure I had spilled some chemicals and maybe the tryptone made my shoes squeak for a week, but the initial success made me feel like I had finally gotten closer to finding my place in the lab.

From that moment the successes started to outweigh the mistakes; I kept learning the mechanics of the lab and I was proving myself to be helpful. At lunch I didn't sit alone; I found my place as the lab's resident teenager who could answer questions about how country music got popular and why snapchat streaks are considered important. At the end of my fourth week, as Amanda approached each day, I realized that the butterflies were gone. This job didn't just teach me about proteins, immunofluorescent antibodies and how to research, it taught me to have confidence in the work that I produce. That confidence molded my misfit piece into a functioning part of the lab, even if I was just a small gear in a much bigger machine.

Sample 2

I never tire of watching the Thames. I like standing on the bank, watching the tides turn. I like watching the boats cruise up and down the river. I like when the tourist boats go past. I like when the calm water gets shaken by the cruising of the boats. I like to walk under the bridges and gaze up at the people above. I like standing on the river bank on the North side of the river; it is hard to get close on the South side. I enjoy standing on the river bank at low tide and picturing how much above the top of my head the water will be when it reaches high tide. I like seeing boats forcefully docked sitting on the river floor. I like observing the difference between the old parts of the river bank and the new. I like the mudlarker's perspective on the city.

My parents moved here for two years... 17 years ago. In the first few years of our abroad experience my family, spent time going around the city doing touristy things. We visited the sites along the river: the London Eye, the Tower of London, the Tate Modern and the Globe Theatre. When we learned we were probably not moving back; our tourist perspective disappeared, and London became home. In my Junior year, a creative writing assignment pushed me back onto the river. I decided to take this opportunity to branch out into a part of the city that had become unfamiliar and to learn an activity I had never heard of anyone I know doing before: mudlarking.

Mudlarking is a historical activity undertaken by historians, sociologists and just interested hobbyists along the riverbed. A mudlark is someone who scavenges the riverbanks at low tide looking for items of value. Mudlarking was most popular in London in the late 18th and 19th centuries when mudlarkers would gather items to sell. Today mudlarks explore for fragments of history, and the community has a strict set of rules and regulations for reporting finds and delivering them to the Museum of London.

After doing some research, I went down to the river for the first time. I climbed awkwardly down the rusted ladder, dropped myself onto the bank and started walking. The perspective felt peculiar and unknown. I was not sure exactly what I should be looking out for. I spotted another mudlarker; he had already filled two plastic bags with his finds. He had a badge around his neck with a red lanyard, identifying himself as an official mudlarker. Somehow I felt slightly intimidated by his badge which indicated his acceptance; this was only my first trip. I walked confidently down to the water with my dad and started looking to see what I could find. I kept looking back to see where the man with the badge was. I wanted to see if he would acknowledge me. I felt like an outsider, but I was determined to find something and become a part of the gang. When I looked down and spotted a fragment of blue pottery: I felt like I too was a mudlarker.

By partaking in mudlarking, I am able to explore the city I call home through a new lens. I am able to explore parts of London I am less familiar with, uncovering their histories as I go. I have lived in the same place and gone to the same school for my entire life. By going outside my comfortable neighbourhood and community, I have uncovered a world of people that I would not have known otherwise. By taking this risk, I pushed myself and realised that, even in a place you call home, there is a new passion that can be discovered.

Sample 3

Gary Payton was number 20 on the Lakers. LeBron James was number 23 on the Cavaliers. Allen Iverson was number 3 on the 76-ers. And I was 7-years-old, wearing my brother's hand me downs. Once my brother grew out of them, I would receive his worn basketball jerseys. Not only did I receive them, but I wore them with pride. I was seven years old and did not care that I was a girl wearing over-sized basketball jerseys. It never crossed my mind that it was out of the ordinary for a little girl to wear baggy shorts down to her ankles, big jerseys, and sometimes, a plastic "bling" necklace with a big dollar sign hanging from my chest.

I was the girl with two older brothers, only boys for friends, and parents who let me wear whatever I wanted—I was the "Tomboy." I was comfortable with my style, and so were the kids in my class; some girls even admitted to buying basketball shorts at Target because, after seeing me wearing them, they thought it was cool. It never struck me that I was "different" until I started to notice the passing glances: people were trying to figure out if I was a boy or a girl. At a soccer stadium, I walked into the girl's bathroom and a woman yelled at me because she thought I was a little boy. Even my extended family members made comments and laughed about the way I dressed. I can remember almost every single time someone asked me about my gender, because it hurt every time.

I could never comprehend why others thought it was so wrong for me to dress the way I did. When people described my boyish style as cute or a "phase," I was offended. I wasn't trying to be different or to make a statement; I was seven years old and was being myself. Every time someone made a derogatory comment about me, I needed to be strong, as a way of defending who I was, and at the same time, building my own confidence.

Today I still struggle with finding the balance between confidence and sensitivity, but this struggle has helped me understand others better. It has taught me to dig deeper—in myself and in others. I recognize when someone's happiness is real or merely put on. I look past the facades that people put up and, by doing so, I create relationships beyond those that are superficial. I like to challenge, to question and to deeply engage with my friends and am not satisfied taking their appearances as a statement of their worth or value. Just like a jersey number does not define the player, my outer image does not reveal my story or how I feel, and it certainly does not reveal the story of my friends.

As I write this now, wearing a ripped Led Zeppelin shirt, high-waisted "Mom Jeans," and brown Doc Martens, not much has changed about who I am today. I may have ditched the basketball jerseys and baggy shorts of my childhood, but my "Tomboy" side has stayed the same. I have a deep voice (for a girl), I love Janis Joplin and Beyoncé, and I play the guitar and drums. Sometimes I still feel that I have to prove my femininity to others, but each day I am becoming more confident in my version of a grown woman—one who knows her worth and is beyond labels; one who does not label others or assess their value based on how they appear. I am not a jersey number, nor am I a "Tomboy." I am me, strong and proud.

Sample 4

How many people constantly worry about croissants?

School break time is a warzone. Chaos. Students sprint through the halls towards the smell of freshly delivered croissants. They dart at full speed, overwhelming the senior students standing behind the compact stand. There I wait, with the rest of the team, bracing myself for the imminent flood of the student body.

The Tuck Shop is a student-led charity initiative where a group of students sells croissants to the school every break time; this is to benefit three annually school-chosen charities. I became involved in 7th grade as a ‘salesman’, and I gradually rose in the croissant ranks. As Financial Director, I discovered a series of leakages, late orders, and a lack of accountability with the finances. More worryingly, I saw that many of the senior students who delivered the food were becoming increasingly sluggish. Disinterested. I found myself consistently preoccupied, wondering if the food would be delivered on time. I knew the system needed to be rebuilt, yet this was a lonely perspective. As no one team member had his name personally attached to the Tuck Shop, some were less absorbed by our mission. I had, however, become completely engrossed. I was dreaming about croissants—a man possessed. I needed to design an efficient model, one that eliminated carelessness. It became more than just a project: it became my life.

The Tuck Shop was profitable, but no one cared to make it more profitable. I witnessed an ambivalent attitude towards an initiative that, with revision, could generate substantial change. I aimed to transform the culture, beginning with remoulding our ethos around the idea that we must profit-maximise, not as an intemperate business, but rather to raise maximum funds for charity. I also ensured that each Tuck Shop member interacted personally with the students, a simple shift to asking for the students’ names before telling them what they owe. Creating this focused, family culture encapsulated our ambition and promoted a rewarding environment. Personally, it was the first real time I applied myself outside of the classroom, and it empowered me to hone my talents in advancing a cause. With reconfigured working times, fresh delivery schedules, and newly discovered inspiration, we were able to increase revenues for charity by 400%.

Challenges came often. Nothing ever ran perfectly. Yet our ability to overcome the mountain of barriers with optimism and confidence was our distinctive attribute. We would approach the stand every morning determined to eclipse our previous achievements. I triggered a change, and this proliferated into a new freedom among the team. They soon understood the significance of our initiative, but more importantly, of our ability to facilitate growth. As humans, we are programmed to persist in comfortability. To incite change, one must firmly champion her own ideals and resist habitual tendencies. However small, the Tuck Shop provided me with a platform to build upon, an opportunity to understand the challenges in—and significance of—inciting change first-hand.

Applying these values to my everyday life was another evolution. Though my experience with the Tuck Shop was a transformative learning opportunity, executing its lessons would be a true sign of progress. I developed a new lens through which to consider society, and here I observed the most criminal of actions: complacency. However trivial an activity, many lack the conviction to maximise the potential of their various circumstances. I witnessed the lacklustre of this charitable initiative, and I was driven to ameliorate it—to mould it into a structure that could garner tangible results. By eliminating complacency, we initiated substantial change.

Croissants are a strange object of unmitigated obsession. However, they will always remain a source of inspiration for me: a buttery testament to the formative lessons I learned during my years at the Tuck Shop.

I imagine that few people constantly worry about croissants. I am happy to count myself as one of them.

Sample 5

Before I could even sit at my lab desk on a Friday morning in May, I was given a call-slip to the main office (commonly known as a detention notice). Good way to start a day.

From outside the room, I could hear people speaking urgently. I stepped into the room, and it fell silent; sitting at the table were all of the school's administrators, amplifying my fear. Finally, they explained why I had been summoned. The night before, a group of freshmen boys had made a swastika out of the mats in the dance studio. They had also harassed a Jewish student and committed other anti-semitic acts.

It took me a moment to process the news. I had been exposed to a certain level of "locker room talk" as a student-athlete but had never witnessed offensive behavior this extreme. I felt a deep frustration regarding the ignorance of my fellow classmates who had carried out these hateful acts. A part of me wanted to dissociate from Piedmont High School entirely; instead, I accepted the administrators' request to address the problem as lead speaker at a school assembly.

I was humbled that my teachers would ask me to carry out this responsibility, but I was genuinely surprised to have been chosen. To me, there were several students with perfect records who seemed like more logical candidates. However, as I walked back towards my classroom, I began to understand why they had chosen me. I wasn't the same face students had seen repeatedly at school events. I wasn't holier-than-thou, and that is what would solidify my sincerity. I also had friends of all ages and backgrounds; my ability to create relationships allowed me to connect with my peers and understand the different social

dynamics at my school. The audience would know that I had no agenda other than to represent my peers.

I spent the next 48 hours writing my speech, contemplating the root of this event. In one of the most progressive regions in America, something was dividing the youth. I was frustrated, but I had to help unite my polarized peers. I had seen a pattern of provocation based on political ideology at my school. This polarization had escalated into such resentment that the people responsible for these actions had lost all compassion for those they might hurt. And yet, while the swastikas in the studio were inexcusable, we needed to understand why they happened in order to work towards a long term solution.

I was tasked with stringing together multiple opinions and perspectives. It was a challenge; if I didn't respect the immature members of the audience, they would shut off and resent my message, but if I did not take a firm enough approach, the members of the student body who already understood the depths of this problem would only be more enraged. For the next hour, I tried to strike this balance. I spoke honestly from my experience with "locker-room talk" at school and about how our school had become desensitized to the damage that this sort of behavior creates in a community.

This assembly showed that derogative behavior is not something that should be accepted, and that there are people in all walks of life who will support you in making wherever you are a better place. I understand that my speech and our assembly did not solve my school's problems overnight—but it was a start. This experience has furthered my role as a social leader, and it solidifies my idea that it doesn't take anyone special to make change; it only takes someone grounded in strong beliefs and morals. It is terrible that this event happened at my school, but I was proud to be representing and protecting the safe environment that I wish for all Piedmont High School students to one day see.

Sample 6

I was going to be an actress-astronaut with a sidekick.

While it is common for young children to have big plans for the future (that may include a hyphen or two), few eight-year-olds plan for the future with their siblings in mind. Knowing that my older brother's wellbeing was one day going to be my responsibility, by the age of eight I had planned for and worried about the future more than a kid should ever have to.

Starting at six years old, I began to develop questions that I was too nervous to ask anyone. Why did my brother always talk about one subject? Why was he affected by things that didn't bother others? Why was I, though four years younger, feeling like the older sibling? Months later I received my answers in the form of a hushed word overheard from my father's office.

“Autistic.”

Suddenly, (though admittedly after a realization that “autistic” was not a unique way of saying “artistic” and my brother was not simply interested in art), the puzzle that was my unconventional childhood suddenly began, piece by piece, to come together. With my new awareness came the understanding that my life would forever be affected by my brother’s disability, so instead of being an actress-astronaut, I would be an actress-astronaut with a sidekick. Simple.

While I have long known how my brother’s autism will affect my future, it was not until recently that I realized how much I have already been shaped by it.

For as long as I can remember, I was conditioned to speak for both of us. I would answer the questions of not only my age but his, where we were going, and what we were doing. I had spoken more than the average 12-year-old by the time I first jumped up on to a stage at the age of six, so I had no fear speaking in front of a crowd of 300 people. What started out as an extension of my sisterly responsibilities quickly turned to a hobby and then to a passion, and I have never looked back.

While my brother's disability led to my confidence in performing, I have been affected by his autism in other ways that are often concealed behind closed curtains. Growing up around the special needs community and sitting in hundreds of group therapy sessions. Countless visiting hours at the psychiatric hospital spent playing board games with my brother and other teenagers, each battling seemingly invisible illnesses. The tantrums of jealousy that have followed my nights out with friends, and the balancing act between living my life to the fullest and not hurting him. These experiences have given me my inclination to reach out to those that seem alone or marginalized and my understanding that one cannot judge others by what is visible from an outside perspective.

There have been and will continue to be hardships that come along with my brother’s mental illness, but I am confident that I would not be as compassionate and driven if not for it. My unique experiences and developed talents have shaped my future in a way that may have otherwise never been possible, and I plan for it understanding that I must continue to speak for both of us.

I have in recent years decided to eliminate astronaut from my future career aspirations.

That being said, I do still plan to be an actress with a sidekick.

Sample 7

Before the sun could make a dent in the darkness of early morning, I clenched my eyes as ice cold water splashed my face. Stuffing a worn backpack with my green coffee-stained apron, I sprinted to catch the bus. At 4:45 a.m. on a Saturday, I should have been sleeping, but I had agreed to cover my co-worker's shift.

Heavy aroma, loud noise, one bulk order for twenty with twenty others impatiently waiting-- "double macchiato, soy, no whipped cream, and a pump of caramel--make it quick." I stayed at the register for an hour before moving to the back of the store. The pads of my hands turning raw as I lathered dishes, my thoughts wandered--how could Starbucks increase co-worker communication and efficiency? While customers were licking foam off their lips two minutes after ordering, in the far back room, management was struggling. A crumpled paper was pinned onto the wall with the weekly schedule graffitied in highlighter and pen marks to signify a shift switch or absence. Our manager, hardly seeking co-worker input, held all responsibility for scheduling.

But what if there were an app that allowed employees to collaborate on schedules, benefiting Starbuck's efficiency and workers' lives? Oh, how I longed to create this fantastic app! Rather than wash endless dishes, I could be listing issues, asking my co-workers for their solutions, brainstorming....

Amanda, calling from the front, broke the monotonous sound of running water and the exciting rush of my running thoughts, "Josh! More Venti cups!" The shift wound down, and as I scrubbed the coffee-splattered floor, eyeing the slowly rotating needle of the clock, I knew I couldn't allow myself to fall into this stationary hole.

At the cost of curiosity, creativity, and individuality, Starbucks ran a tight ship that I ached to jump from, into the frothy waters of problems waiting to be solved. I began skimming the *Wall Street Journal*, researching entrepreneurship, and wondering how I could start my own company. It didn't take long to realize that I couldn't spontaneously found the next Google. I thought of David Mitchell, who wrote, "What is an ocean but a multitude of drops," and I began to create my ocean, one drop at a time.

While the rest of my friends were enjoying their pool days, I was reading *Finding the Next Steve Jobs* and *The Founder's Dilemmas*. I began to attend company pitches, designing and printing my own "business cards." Mesmerized by elevator pitches, marketing strategies, and technological innovations, I sought to share this knowledge with my peers and decided to found the Entrepreneurship Club at my school.

I ran into an obstacle right away. "I'm sorry Joshua, but the school already has the Investment Banking Club." *The Investment Banking Club??* No, I argued, entrepreneurship is so different from investment banking; it would be like comparing Nana's homemade machaca to the "authentic" Mexican burrito at Taco Bell. I finally convinced that the Entrepreneurship Club would contribute to the school community in a different and profound way.

Marketing the club was the easy part. To attract the customer, I had to provide incentive: Room D208 became a miniature movie theater complete with projector, popcorn, drinks, and *The Social Network*. Licorice was given to those brave enough to present their

ideas and pitch them to the club, and with each stick given, my members grew in confidence. One drop at a time, I saw my ocean expanding.

In the future, I dream of creating a company whose success derives from all of its employees' contributions and ideas. Whether I bring my artistic passions to the design team, my coding skills to the tech team, or my quantitative analysis to the finance team, I want to lead, not dictate. Unlike Starbucks, which operated top-down, I envision a collaborative organization that promotes individuality, curiosity, and creativity.

Sample 8

I was the first to spot the coils of barbed wire mangling the left hind leg of the graceful creature that stood before me. The embedded noose was suffocating the giraffe as he limped along. The snare had been designed to kill rhinos and elephants in a protected national park, and this giraffe was an accidental victim. Our tour guide sullenly locked eyes with the animal and contacted the park rangers to alert them. I never learned the fate of the snared giraffe, so whether they saved the leg or had to relieve the giant from its suffering by putting the animal down, I will never know. I knew that at that point, there was nothing I could do to assist this helpless creature because I lacked the knowledge to relieve its pain and the influence to fight against poaching. However, I promised myself then and there that that this would not be the case forever.

While living in Kenya, Indonesia, and Germany, I have witnessed the world from looking out of a window. I have seen cruelty and injustices targeted not only at animals but at people as well. For example, when driving through rural villages of Africa, I saw a scared dog dragging its hind legs across a busy intersection where it had already been hit by oncoming traffic, chickens crammed into tiny cages with their feet removed, donkeys and horses pulling buggies despite having raw infected sores all across the back, and a Maasai warrior forced to kill a lion with nothing but a spear in order to move up in his tribe's social ranks. I believe that we need to improve animal welfare globally, but I acknowledge that simply stating that certain individuals are wrong and that somehow my perspective is superior to theirs will not change anything. When I see injustices occurring, I know that I want to stop them.

To make good on my promise, I have taken advantage of every opportunity to help animals in my community and learn about veterinary science. I started by focusing on animals close to my home: I fed the feral dogs that wandered into the empty plot behind my house and took in the birds and kittens that I found abandoned in the middle of the road. I was able to directly provide them with food and shelter, and I was glad to be able to play a key part in their recovery, or for those too sick to recover, a comforting and loving end of life. This summer, I had the chance to help animals in a more formal and impactful way; I worked at a veterinarian's office, where I assisted and shadowed veterinarians as they worked to save and improve the lives of local animals. I was fascinated when one veterinarian diagnosed rat poisoning in a dog that seemed to be dying. I felt great satisfaction watching animals recover from injuries that would have been fatal had we not intervened. It is life-changing to see how these veterinarians can make an immediate

difference for the animals; they come in sick, in pain, and at times seemingly hopeless, yet after a few days, they are often able to leave healthy and happy, or at least on the road to recovery.

Looking forward, I am determined to pursue higher education in the field of animal science and become a veterinarian. This will allow me to positively impact the lives of animals around the world. Specifically, I hope my study of medicine will contribute to improving the quality of life for animals in underdeveloped communities, giving them a voice in a society in which they are often overlooked.

Sample 9

Sobremesa is a Spanish word that refers to the moment during a meal or over coffee when everyone is making conversation.

In my family's *sobremesa*, nine seats at the table were a given. Nine burgundy velvet chairs towered over the perfectly set placemats; nine identical ones for 8 adults and me. The aroma of fresh lasagna was peppered by fervent conversation about the Opposition's latest political movement or yet another economic failure. That's how I grew up: a little girl surrounded by big words, a kid at the grown-ups' table. And I loved it; the *sobremesa* became my favorite school.

During the *sobremesa*, my plate was always loaded with flavorful foods and savory discussions that left my taste buds craving more. Over delicious meals and enthralling conversation, I packed my plate with Bolognese pasta, vegetables, and an interest for Modern Art and Politics. As I debated with my uncles about whether the Cubans had made a smart move or not, I acquired a taste for social issues. Even when my stomach was full, my appetite for new subjects and knowledge was never satisfied.

Contrary to the Venezuela outside of our dining room, *sobremesa* was a place where everyone, despite gender or age, was treated as an equal. The democracy that my fellow Venezuelans mythologized was ever-present at my dining table, where every vote counted in deciding next week's menu. At the end of a meal, chores were evenly distributed amongst my family members. Sometimes, it was my turn to do the dishes, and other times, I enjoyed finishing my coffee while watching my dad and uncle clean up. Justice, respect, and equality were values instilled in me by our *sobremesa*. Especially today, amidst a turbulent political climate and the speculation that incessantly follows it, I find comfort in knowing there is always a place where the values I believe in still exist.

With the overflow of knowledge and empowerment on my plate, I gained a confidence and adventurousness that allowed me to take on any subject with the adults at the table. These traits became an essential element in my place setting: my silverware, the tools that brought me foreign exotic foods as well as intimidating unknown experiences. Fork in hand, I sampled Causa Limeña (a Peruvian dish) and signed up for hip-hop dance lessons.

The world became my buffet and I, an expert taster, sampled everything that came my way, from playing the drums to “cooking” ceviche.

Inspired by Aliadas en Cadena, an organization started by my Grandmother that stands for something I deeply believe in—female empowerment through education in technology—I founded “Code Your Future”, an after-school programming course that teaches girls from my school to code. In Venezuela, and most of the world, there is a pronounced difference in the number of women and men that work in technology-related fields, almost proportional to the educational opportunities that these people have. Despite lacking the ability to completely extinguish inequality, I believe that no improvement is too small to be made, so I strive to apply the values of my sobremesa out in my community, in any way that I can, in as many ways as I can.

Sobremesa gave me the confidence to break out into quirky dances and then easily transition to discussing international issues with people twice my age. I was treated as an equal, and I will pay this gift forward and treat others as equals wherever I go. I will use sobremesa as a blueprint for the society I hope to help build while still staying open to trying things from the buffet of life. I sit today in my sobremesa excited that the knowledge I’ve gained and will gain, combined with the experiences that I will have, will enable me, one day, to bring the principles of my sobremesa to the Venezuela outside of these four walls.

School Supplements: Why X?

Below are sample supplemental essays from various schools. This is by no means an exhaustive list of all possible questions you might be asked; it is just meant to give you an idea of the common prompts you might encounter from any given school.

Why Tufts? (50-100 words)²

Note: Mentors, for the admissions' feedback on all Tufts essays provided, see separate "Tufts Blog" resource

Student 1: When doing my college search earlier this year, I watched videos online in order to become familiar with the institutions. One thing that struck me about Tufts was several of the admissions videos were made by students. No other school had that. Tufts' students appear to take initiative outside of the classroom, and Tufts itself seems to place trust in the students. Coming from a high school where the sixth formers are largely involved in planning school events, I admire this. There is a difference between academic responsibility and having responsibilities in school. At Tufts, I see myself having both.

Student 2: Appreciating difference and embracing difference are two different things. To appreciate is to boast statistics showing a diverse student population. To embrace is to devote an entire section of the university, the ExCollege, to subjects that don't fit into traditional disciplines, or to create six distinct centers for diversity so that each student has a place on campus. Tufts embraces difference in every sense. I want to be part of a community where varying languages, hobbies, and majors don't drive students apart, but bring them together out of a shared respect for experiences separate from their own.

Student 3: "Dibble-dabble" surfaced repeatedly during my spring campus tour. Tufts' "dibble-dabbling" isn't merely sampling but instead enthusiastically seeking connections across seemingly discrete disciplines. I now refer to relating various subjects as "Tuftsy," like my passions for intersections between linguistics and sociology or caricature and biopsychology. Poised to "dibble-dabble" before declaring a major, I'm intrigued by ILVS, with its interdisciplinary, global, humanities focus via an artistic lens. I also thrive in collaboratively creating visual and performing art and value the inventiveness Tufts' SFMA acquisition will infuse into the liberal arts education and social community. I'm Tuftsy—curious, excited, and ready to "dibble-dabble."

² Sourced from Tufts' Admissions Blog

Cornell -- College of Agriculture and Life Sciences: Why are you drawn to studying the major you have selected? Please discuss how your interests and related experiences have influenced your choice. Specifically, how will an education from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) and Cornell University help you achieve your academic goals? (650 words)

Within the many different fantasies I have about my future, each possible outcome includes a fundamental change in the world's present path with regard to the environment and its natural resources. Each one involves dedicating my adult life to altering humanity's perception of sustainable living within an urban context. For me, the first step in creating a shift in perspective is to be thoroughly educated on the subject.

In fact, I first stepped onto Cornell's campus this past summer, during the school's summer sessions. (Well, I actually first stepped onto Cornell's campus this last spring, which was the only time that the campus had been closed due to excessive snow in recent recorded history.) I took Green Cities and Sustainable Futures, and here I began to understand the utmost importance of the design and infrastructure of urban environments. The course offered just a taste of the urban sustainability field, and that taste has inspired me to invest my energy toward immersing myself in urban design and its effects on the globe.

With this in mind, I would enthusiastically pursue a CALS major in Environmental and Sustainability Sciences, with a concentration in Environmental Policy and Governance. I want to see how human populations have historically reacted to environmentally focused policy; what has been holding us back from encouraging and implementing green initiatives? Cornell offers many classes on the subject of Environmental Studies, including Ethics and Environment: here, I could dive head first into the sociology behind the human population's abusive relationship with nature. In doing this, I would develop a better understanding of current and historical environmental policy, as well as the effects of writing and implementing that policy.

Cornell is quite the place to study in the field of Environmental Policy and Urban Sustainability, given its many collections of green houses, green roofs, and greenery (granted there is less than a foot of snow outside). For example, Cornell's Gold-Rated, LEED certified Fernow Hall is blooming with rain gardens, a green roof, motion sensing lighting, heating and cooling technologies, as well as an impressive photovoltaic solar energy system. Uniquely, Cornell implements environmentally forward technologies into the actual buildings where subjects like environmental sustainability are taught; I find this real-life execution of academic concepts to be inspiring. I know that attending Cornell would afford me ample opportunity to study the positive effects of green infrastructure hands on, as well as take part in maintaining that infrastructure on campus. I would also like to be a part of further exploring ways to institute initiatives like Cornell's on a larger scale, and this opportunity for exploration is available through the university's commitment to undergraduate research. In Professors Kraft and Lauber's Environmental Policy Processes class, I could focus my learning on the effects of specific environmental policy; simultaneously, I would be in an ideal, subject specific setting. Washington D.C. is the place to be when studying any political field, especially given the recent changes implemented by the American government regarding federal environmental policy.

Beyond D.C., I'm particularly interested in CALS' study abroad program in Shanghai. China is undergoing large-scale urbanization at an alarmingly rapid rate: this provides an interesting and important environment to begin my part in the inevitable expansion of Environmental Policy worldwide. I would be able to study sustainable energy systems on a major scale, as well as be immersed in research and learning opportunities available only in Shanghai. Ultimately, it's my hope that my experience studying in China could aid me in impacting the ways that large and dense urban environments are designed and maintained. Plus, it's a chance to use my Chinese!

Yes, it is hard to draft a document entitled "Sarah's Plan for the World" and materialize it effectively. However, I am confident that with the opportunities Cornell proffers, in both education and experience, the realization of my change-the-world fantasies is not out of reach.

Why Penn? (650 words)

Penn has been on my mind for a long time. I grew up hearing tales of the good old days in Philly from my father, my uncle, and their college buddies. Their stories and my memories of visits to Penn as a child created a vision of utopia that I always longed to experience. When I revisited the campus recently, I felt that dream-like image come to life. As I witnessed eager students greet familiar faces on Locust Walk and head excitedly to their next class, it reinforced what I already knew: Penn is the right place to make my dreams come true.

In ninth grade, I took AP environmental science, a course that brought about my passion for the natural world. From collecting water samples on the Nissequogue River to farming in the Galapagos, I discovered my own connection to the environment and my desire to protect it from the damage caused by humans. A particular topic that peaked my interest was alternative energy: a potential solution to the crises involving pollution, climate change, and depletion of resources. I want to be a part of this solution. That is where Penn comes along. At the School of Engineering and Applied Science, I can pursue a major in mechanical engineering with a minor in energy and sustainability. Penn also has ample opportunities for research in the energy field, in which I hope to participate. When I spoke to Professor Carpick about his studies on energy efficiency, friction, and lubricants, his zeal radiated like the sun off a solar panel and powered my own excitement.

I was first truly introduced to engineering in eleventh grade while taking AP Physics 1&2 and an engineering elective, while simultaneously becoming involved in the Women in Science and Engineering Club. As a "late bloomer" in the engineering field, what I initially lacked in experience, I made up for in passion. Each day, I looked forward to wiring a scoreboard, creating a hydraulic arm, or building a balsa wood bridge. I challenged myself to apply the mathematical and scientific concepts I learned in physics to solve real world problems and make my designs more unique, more efficient, and more innovative. Walking through the door to the physics lab was like walking through a portal where the impossible could become plausible and where ordinary students could solve extraordinary problems. I hope to do more hands-on work at Penn in the junior and senior design labs and in extracurricular activities, such as the electric car team. Aside from being starstruck by the

opportunity to work on such a successful engineering project, I was also impressed by the sheer number of participants, the level of teamwork involved, and the overall sense of collaboration at Penn. With my background in sports, I possess a deep appreciation of synergy. It is encouraging to know that a group of engineers can work together with the same motivation and cooperation to build a car as a soccer team needs to win a tournament. There are a number of initiatives to be excited about at Penn—Pennergy, Penn Environmental Group—but what entices me the most are the people there. The faculty, alumni, and student body are all comprised of brilliant individuals that come from such diverse backgrounds. When I sat in on Professor Cassel’s Engineering Entrepreneurship class, I observed the students ask deep questions and challenge statements with palpable ambition. The Penn community creates an environment in which I will be challenged to work harder, to pursue more knowledge, and to accomplish something meaningful.

My generation needs innovative thinkers to take on challenges that face society. I believe that the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Engineering and Applied Science will be able to take my creative mind and unstoppable drive—alongside my fondness of math and physics—and mold me not only into a successful engineer, but also a substantial difference maker.

We would like to know more about your interest in NYU. We are particularly interested in knowing what motivated you to apply to NYU and more specifically, why you have applied or expressed interest in a particular campus, school, college, program, and/or area of study? If you have applied to more than one, please tell us why you are interested in each of the campuses, schools, colleges, or programs to which you have applied. You may be focused or undecided, or simply open to the options within NYU's global network; regardless, we want to understand - Why NYU? (400 word maximum)

Sample 1, NYU: Even though I’ve grown up in Venezuela, New York University has been on my radar for years. It is one of the few universities with a truly global reach. From having campuses in New York, Abu Dhabi, and Shanghai, to also offering vast opportunities for students to study abroad, it’s clear that NYU believes in the power of international engagement, and that it aims to give its students room to explore as they gain an education. The school has a proven track record of attracting talented students from all over the world and giving them opportunities to improve their lives. As an international student myself, this is the primary reason that I want to further my studies at NYU.

I believe deeply in the importance of international engagement. Potential setbacks do exist while interacting with unfamiliar cultures around the world, but I believe that the benefits of global commitment far outweigh the risks, so I would love to be a part of furthering NYU’s mission of global education. Furthermore, I believe that I thrive most when I’m challenged, as it turns me into a more adaptive, imaginative, and inventive person. I was raised in an environment in which I faced constant difficulties. Although it was complicated, I believe that I became who I’m today because of this. For this reason, I want my college experience to continue to shape me in order to become the best version of myself. NYU will force me to grow in every aspect: academically, socially, and emotionally.

Continuing the work that I have been doing for the past years is an important factor for me as well. At NYU I would have the opportunity to engage in these activities, such as continuing to learn German, on a different level. I hope to study abroad at NYU Berlin to continue my language development while placing myself in a new environment. I also plan to join NYU MUN, which will give me the opportunity to continue this intellectually challenging activity that has been a part of my life for the past five years.

Although I want to develop new interests and passions during my college years, I believe that continuing those that I already have will only strengthen my development. Because of this, I sought out for a place that could support my current passions while also forcing me to find new ones; NYU is that place.

Sample 2, NYU: I am applying to the New York University's College of Arts and Science for an Economics major because it will enable me to pursue my varied academic interests and set me up for a successful future. First and foremost, I like how NYU offers a unique approach to the teaching of Economics by splitting it up into two different concentrations. Both are appealing, but I would like to concentrate my major in Theory, as I desire a traditional education. I'm excited to learn from professors and teachers who are actively researching in this field, and if given the opportunity, I hope to conduct research with them. Specifically, I am interested in the teaching of Assistant Professor Katarína Borovičková. Her research on the intersection of macroeconomics and labor economics really appeals to what I am interested in studying: how our economy will change as our manual labor is increasingly done by robots. One other aspect of NYU's Economics department that appeals to me is the Honors Program. I would love an opportunity to apply all of the learning I will do throughout college into an honors thesis during my senior year.

Aside from the Economics department, I appreciate all of the career-oriented resources that NYU offers students to help them plan for their futures. Career fairs at NYU draw representatives from many different industries, so I would have the opportunity to view career opportunities across more than just financial fields. These fairs would also grant me access to NYU's strong alumni network, which would provide further support for my career after school. In addition to great academic programs, NYU has exciting student-run societies, like the NYU Stern Finance Society. This society offers a variety of lectures and seminars on finance, which would allow me to learn about topics outside of my major in an academic style. Finally, I would hope to continue my experience in the world of publications by joining the staff of the Washington Square News. I have a passion for sports, so I would love to be a part of the journalistic group covering NYU's athletic department.

To me, NYU is much more than just a university in New York. It is a place where I can see myself growing exponentially as both a student and as an individual.

School Supplements: Other Supplements

Tell us about who you are. How would your family, friends, and/or members of your community describe you? If possible, please include something about yourself that you are most proud of and why. (250 words)

Imran tells me I'm the glue that holds our friend group together; Rikhi says I am the first person in his life to ever give him the time of day; Courtney tells me I am the embodiment of a sunflower; Erin says she's started practicing "Lauren Thoughts" when she feels down.

I've always known that I value optimism, but until people started expressing these sorts of sentiments to me in recent years, I hadn't known how much of my personality revolved around positivity. Although I'm not sure when exactly I took on the identity of a blooming peony, it seems as though I've become known for my vibrant personality, and my greatest skill is sharing my happiness with those around me. Recently, my vibrancy has begun physically manifesting itself in my appearance. Since the the eighth grade, not a day has gone by without at least a portion of my hair dyed a fun color. I've dabbled in most colors, but I always find myself drawn back to pastels. Bold, but soft and easy-going, like me.

I radiate positivity not only because it's part of who I am, but because I want to spread my joy to those around me. I have no purpose if I'm keeping all this love to myself. I have so much to give to others, so much in fact I sometimes overextend myself in a flood of adoration, but nonetheless I will share my positivity until there is no more to give.

Describe the environment in which you were raised (250 words)

At age six I was enrolled in a single-sex school where I would spend nine years with 42 girls by my side. I didn't see it as a careless 6th grader, but this environment afforded me privileges that have profoundly impacted my beliefs today. Surrounded by my classmates in Physical Education I threw myself into my favorite silly games. I focused on Castle Ball or Gold Rush instead of fixating on what my body looked like under too-tight gym clothes. In my favorite class, French, I could raise my hand as many times as I wanted without worrying that my voice occupied too much space in the room, that my enthusiasm made me seem too outspoken or too opinionated. My interest in women's rights and feminism came from never being told that I could not, or should not, do something because of my gender. My self confidence was cultivated by an environment that treated me as a person and a learner, not just a girl. However, I understand that not everyone has this privilege. Across the world women are being denied education and basic rights. Even at home friends and classmates keep their hands glued to their sides in class for fear of judgement. Knowing how crucial this empowering environment has been to my self development, I want to work towards a world in which no person feels like their gender identity masks their abilities and aspirations.

Tell us about the subjects or ideas that excite your intellectual curiosity. (250 words)

Mathematics is not easy. Because of this, I knew it was imperative that I acquire the skill of persistence, or “Mathematical Rigor” as my teacher Mr. Bell calls it. I have learned that it is the moments of confusion that make Mathematics so thrilling, as the anticipation of clarity builds. I came to appreciate this fact during my Additional Mathematics and Pure Mathematics courses. These are the most advanced math courses offered to students in the Caribbean. Pure Mathematics especially is notorious for being unreasonably difficult. The exams were indeed gruelling, but I did my best. In fact, I had actually done the best in Jamaica for both, and the third best in the Caribbean. All along, I thought that the point of “Mathematical Rigor” was to get all the answers correct. I now understand that the true accomplishment is to accept that I will not have all the answers, but if I remain persistent and patient, I will achieve great things.

After watching "A Beautiful Mind," I had a craving to make some mathematical discovery. An aspect of math that I would love to demystify is the workings of infinity and zero. What on earth happens when you divide by zero? Since horizontal and vertical lines are perpendicular, is the negative multiplicative inverse of zero equal to infinity? Perhaps in college, I will learn more about these "numbers". Maybe I will even be part of the team that completely demystifies infinity and zero! How cool would that be.

Celebrate the role of sports in your life. (250 words)

I may be a sturdy 5’9,” but I cannot sprint or catch a ball to save my life. I used to be extremely self-conscious of this, idolizing female athletes in movies, like Bend it like Beckham’s Jess Paxton, and longing to understand discussions of the Warriors’ best hope for the 2016 Championship. Wanting to be involved, I spent several years sailing, and even played volleyball freshman year. I enjoyed this athletic jaunt but after several unfulfilling years I wanted to be involved in something I was truly passionate about: theater. Auditioning for school plays I finally found myself amongst other people who got out of breath going up a flight of stairs; I could jump right into conversations about Elle Woods’s impeccable vocal range without feeling as though I was hearing gibberish. Since the moment I stopped fixating on becoming an athlete, theater has become one of the most important and constant parts of my life. I love exploring a new world with each character I play: worlds without water, like Soupy Sue’s in Urinetown, or worlds of chocolate factories and gluttonous sons like Mrs. Gloop’s in Willy Wonka. Being around people who share my interests makes me excited to learn more and determined to continue improving. There’s a conception that one should be good at everything. Trying sports, and learning they weren’t a fit, showed me that this isn’t true. The one thing I love is much more meaningful than anything I feel obligated to do.

Nelson Mandela believed that “what counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.” Describe a way in which you have made or hope to make a difference. (250 words)

Ten years ago I met one of my best friends. That day I joined the community of advocates for those with special needs. While seeing beyond the autism that traps Tyler, I’ve dedicated countless hours to raising awareness and soliciting funds to find a cure. Inviting me into their homes and trusting me with their children, this community inspires me. As Vice-Chair of the largest team of an Autism Speaks Chicago-area walk, I deliver speeches and produce films that present their diverse stories. We unify as partners, not divided by who is or isn’t on the spectrum.

My footprint could be calculated in dollars raised, people informed, or materials developed, but I hope the reach will be far greater. As actor, I portrayed Lennie with special needs in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* more honestly and empathetically; as student body president, I more naturally advocate on behalf of everyone, and as friend to Tyler and others, I’m more patient and flexible. Each of these “audiences” then is influenced, and my potential impact expands in perpetuity. While I’ll always enjoy Tyler for who he is, I hope someday his burden will be lifted, and we’ll look each other directly in the eye, seamlessly chatting about our shared interest in classical music. Until then, I’ll support Tyler and his family in their quest to triumph over autism. Moreover, I vow to remain his friend, laughing and learning with him, applying his wisdom to everything I do, at Tufts and beyond.

What’s your favorite word and why? (300 words)

Home. For years, I struggled to define the word. The term contains a rare property that makes it truly dynamic: fluidity. My search for home, which has carried me from the tri-state area to the Land of the Rising Sun, has ensured that my background would never be easy to explain. In a frequently changing atmosphere where individuals are accustomed to losing close friends, I never truly considered the international school environment to be my home. In New Jersey, I am known as “London”, and on my predominantly British football team, I go by “Jersey”. Teetering between metropolitan capitals and a quiet suburb, it is easy to feel a sense of instability.

My seemingly endless search for the perfect home was halted in light of a recent realization: home is a community that one can identify with, and communities are not limited to geographical regions. A community is not based on where one lives, but rather on how he or she chooses to live. My home is an assortment of aspects of my personality, and is not limited to a specific place or thing. I am a member of the international community, but my identity encompasses far more than just this group. As a Student Ambassador, I emphasize the importance of embracing new students and providing them

with a supportive community of similar yet unique individuals. No matter where they are from, they will always have a community to make them feel at home. Equipped with this knowledge, I am confident in my ability to adapt to any setting. Making myself at home is simply a matter of seeking out communities within my environment. In other words, making myself at home is what I have been doing my whole life.

How do you personally define an inclusive environment? What do you believe contributes to a diverse and accepting community? (400 words or less)

I personally define an inclusive environment as one in which all of the people feel comfortable because there are no social barriers since everyone is willing to learn and accept others who come from different walks of life. A diverse and accepting community must have a foundation of an open mindset. Prejudice, or judging someone before you can get to know their experience, is common and natural. Prejudice can exist, but there must be acknowledgement towards it. An open mind is required in order to understand other people's experiences. In order to have an open mindset, patience is required to maintain it. While prejudice can sometimes result in conflict, this can be resolved if you listen fully to people and don't judge them before you hear their story. It is always best to come to a compromise through communication. Having an open mind also means that you've acknowledged that you can't always have things 100% your way. There are going to be people you meet that may have different opinions. You shouldn't force your opinions on someone else, just as they shouldn't force their opinions on you. Respect for other people's opinions means allowing them to speak their minds and say their true feelings. Allowing others to do so creates a foundation of respect and healthy communication in the community.

Empathy is a subset of an open mind; being able to put yourself in another person's shoes means that you can understand what experiences they've had. Even if you are disgusted by other people's beliefs or actions, it is important to hear their stories and why they believe that. Multiculturality is also a huge contributor to a diverse and inclusive community. If you have people from all walks of life, everyone can learn from each other's stories and cultures. This creates connection between people who may see each other's cultures as foreign or alien. Additionally, this also teaches us to have a more open mind in the face of new situations at broad, making us less uncomfortable with socializing with people outside of our tighter friend groups. Any community will naturally have majorities and minorities, so being able to speak up for those who are discriminated against allows for equality between people and will make everyone feel as though they are included and valued in the community.

UC Sample Essays

The UC application system requires you to write four 350-word essays from eight available prompts. The prompts *could* change from year to year, but they rarely change significantly. Many of the prompts often mirror the prompts from the Common App or other school supplements, so you may be able to pare down an existing essay or essays.

1. Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes or contributed to group efforts over time.

When I was 14, a stranger changed my life.

I was travelling through Italy with a service group, and as part of our trip, we were partnering with community organizations. At a municipal church in Assisi, we met with a group of adults with special needs. During this meeting, one of the women pulled me aside and into a dark side room. Though I was uncertain where she was leading me and a bit uncomfortable, I followed her.

Surprisingly, I soon found myself slamming the keys of a portable electric piano with this woman I barely knew. As she played, she grabbed my hand and placed it on a random set of keys. My discomfort quickly vanished as I realized that she simply wanted to share her passion with me; she wanted a friend. I smiled and sat with her for nearly an hour.

This small experience -- a momentary friendship -- has greatly influenced me. I often think about what I would have missed had I freed my hand and refused to follow her, had I chosen familiarity and comfort over experience and connection.

I realized that some people do not have the opportunities to make friends as easily as I do. This epiphany led me to begin attending Best Buddies meetings early in my high school career. I loved it. After years of conversations and games of hangman with the other Buddies, the graduating leaders asked me to become President for my senior year. I immediately agreed, and once in office, I scheduled more frequent meetings with more publicity. This year over 70 students signed up for the club, more than double the number from previous years.

At the heart of all my activities is a passion for including everyone. I have seen the potential of a connected community of peers, but achieving it requires knowing the opinions and backgrounds of others. I will continue this mission in college. Not every chance encounter will be as impactful as the one I had in Italy, but I hope to engender the significance of unexpected friendship wherever I go.

2. Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

“What animal do you think this is, Claire?” asked Caylen, pointing to her drawing.

“It’s an eagle,” said Ruby, before I had time to answer. She had committed the kindergarten equivalent of treason.

“WHY DID YOU TELL HER THAT?? SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO GUESS!!” screamed Caylen. As their “apprentice,” it was my duty to diffuse any fights, so I created a diversion.

“It’s ok guys,” I said. “What animal do you think I am?” I crawled on the floor and waved my arm in front of me.

“Elephant!” They yelled. Many animal imitations followed, and the altercation was long forgotten. There’s no childhood quarrel that charades can’t fix.

My affinity for unique problem solving has not only helped me keep little ones in line; it has also gotten me through many roadblocks in school, work, and other activities. In Spanish class, I quickly grew bored of the presentations on various Mexican cities, so I vowed that all my PowerPoints would be interactive. When my history classmates were short on ideas on how to create an informational video on the history of Afghanistan, I suggested that they replicate the script and behaviors of a TV cooking show: all the ingredients, or historical events, thrown together to form modern Afghanistan. When I was a Girl Scout, I created the “Buy a Box, Get a Joke” sales strategy, in which we delivered jokes as a reward for purchasing a box of cookies -- an incentive that was highly successful as well as humorous.

Woodrow Wilson once said, “I not only use all the brains that I have, but all that I can borrow.” When I encounter a problem, I like to consider how another person might find a solution. This creative thinking led me to receive an award from my high school English department for my “ability to see life and literature from a different perspective.” I know that these examples are small, but I believe they have given me a creative confidence that will someday lead me to making a big difference for myself and others.

3. What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?

It's midnight in the middle a parking lot when Erin turns to me, face illuminated only by the yellow glow of the flickering street lights. Whenever she's down, she tells me, she practices "Lauren thoughts."

It's two A.M. on the back deck, when, swathed in a blanket of warm air, Imran tells me I'm the glue that holds our friend group together.

It's a groggy morning after a surprise birthday party when Rikhi tells me I am the first person in his life to ever give him the time of day.

It's lunchtime on a bustling Wednesday when Courtney tells me I am the embodiment of a sunflower.

I've always known that I value optimism, but until people started expressing these sorts of sentiments to me in recent years, I hadn't known how much of my personality revolved around positivity. Although I'm not sure when exactly I took on the identity of a blooming peony, it seems as though I've become known for my vibrant personality, and my greatest skill is sharing my happiness with those around me. I always focus on making others feel appreciated, and I will never abandon my affectionate attitude. Recently, my vibrancy has begun physically manifesting itself in my appearance. Since the the eighth grade, not a day has gone by without at least a portion of my hair dyed a fun color. I've dabbled in most colors - blue, pink, red, purple - but I always find myself drawn back to pastels. Bold, but soft and easy-going, like me.

I radiate positivity not only because it's part of who I am, but because I want to spread my joy to those around me. I have no purpose if I'm keeping all this love to myself. I have so much to give to others, so much in fact I sometimes overextend myself in a flood of adoration, but nonetheless I will share my positivity until there is no more to give.

4. Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.

For my whole life, I have had to struggle with learning disabilities, but after years of grappling with my school work, I began to work to overcome my difficulties and succeed. When I was in 6th grade, I was diagnosed with ADHD and Executive Function Disorder. Combined, these make it much harder for me to focus, manage my time, and plan ahead. Throughout middle school and into high school, I didn't know how to cope with my learning differences, and my productivity suffered greatly. During my freshman year in particular, it seemed like every essay I wrote turned into an endless struggle between distraction and productivity. I wanted to do well, but I simply didn't have the tools to keep myself focused.

Late in my freshman year, I began to work with a tutor to help coach me on techniques for managing my time and goals. Over the last three years, she has helped me immensely. I now use my planner to schedule out my daily homework. I use "self statements," reminders designed to keep me on task and encourage good habits. I also frequently create short and long-term goals for my academic career. All of these combined have made me more productive and helped me learn the study skills necessary for success. I have seen my grades improve, but more importantly, I have seen my confidence improve. I know that my learning disabilities will be with me forever, but I also know that I can overcome them.

I consider myself lucky. I know that not everyone can pay for an organizational tutor, but my parents were willing to make that sacrifice. I appreciate every moment I have with her, because I know that she is preparing me for the long road of independence that lies ahead, in college and in my career. I remind myself every time we meet that I can not waste such a valuable opportunity to learn how to thrive.

5. Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?

For the majority of my life, I was a shy, timid girl, both socially and academically. Independent projects were my safe haven, and group discussions were the bane of my existence. I had brilliant, thoughtful ideas, but somewhere along their journey from my brain to my tongue they became a garbled nonsense of "um's" and "uh's" and floundering pauses. I had opinions on the social hierarchy of the Renaissance! I had thoughts about Lennie and George's plight in pursuit of the American Dream! But alas, my teachers were unaware of my intellect because I was incapable of vocalizing my ideas.

Sophomore English changed that for me. The class followed the Socratic method, which I found challenging because of the frequently obtrusive opinions of some of my more immature classmates. The class had a few students in particular who drew great pleasure from constantly inserting their opinions into group discussions, regardless of relevance or value, just to get a reaction from someone. As the self-proclaimed liberal feminist I was, I often tried to argue with them, but I usually left class frustrated with my inability to convince these kids their ideologies were wrong. As this drew on for months, I began to realize something: if I listened to them and considered their opinions as valid and contributinal, we could have a conversation rather than an argument.

Conversing with these classmates forced me to clearly articulate my questions and ideas in order to maintain a civil and intelligent discussion. I needed to be precise, straightforward, and thoughtful during discussions in order to make clear I respected opinions that differed from my own; otherwise, everything I said would be disregarded. This skill further developed throughout the year as I learned how to acknowledge counterarguments, find and cite reliable sources, and use evidence to support my claims. Being in a class with people who had equally strong opposing opinions was challenging, but it exposed me to diverse ideologies and taught me how to confidently make cohesive, sound arguments.

6. Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.

The guide's voice became muffled as the wind grew stronger, and I peered into the distance at a weirdly familiar looking pile of earth. My windbreaker flapped against me and red dirt swirled around my feet as I began to realize what I was looking at.

"Is that a mine?" I asked the guide, interrupting his spiel about the Utah weather.

"Why yes it is!" he exclaimed. "Specifically, it's a uranium mine, and those piles of dirt-

"-are the mine tailings, which are probably leaching heavy metals into the river. Right?" I finished excitedly. The guide looked hurt that I had stolen his thunder, but I felt a level of academic enthusiasm that was unfamiliar to me.

At the time of this spring break trip, I'd been in AP Environmental Science for almost an entire school year, and it had proven itself to be the most interesting class I'd taken. I'd always been a lover of the outdoors, but I knew little besides what I had witnessed while exploring with my family and friends. My APES teacher was new, but his excitement was contagious, and I dove headfirst into the world of ecosystems, greenhouse gases, and pollution.

In my small town, the streets are clean, people drive electric cars, the garbage trucks pick up recycling separately, roofs are plastered with solar panels, and every home has at least one vegetable garden. The nearest factory, refinery, or power plant is at least thirty minutes away. Before visiting Utah, I had never seen a mine, nor any other large environmentally-detrimental project. While the damage from mining definitely isn't great for the planet, Utah exposed me to things I had learned about but could never experience at home. Throughout the trip, the things I saw - kangaroo rats, cryptobiotic soil, and the symbiotic relationship between yucca plants and yucca moths, to name a few - made me more excited than I ever knew I could be about an academic subject. My enthusiasm for environmental science has only continued, and I've largely based my college list upon schools that offer majors associated with my environmental passion.

7. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

When I first adopted my storm drain, I knew it was going to get more attention than it needed.

I adopted my storm drain from the City of Oakland at the end of my junior year of high school. I found the opportunity while looking for ways to support my community, and it seemed like an easy way to make a difference. Over the summer it received some neglect as I travelled, but never did I abandon my vital storm drain that heroically stops the litter that would, without its existence, be bound for our estuary. As I spread news of my relationship with my angelic drain, my peers began adopting drains as well. I began receiving frequent before and after snapchats of their drains' transformations. This process was uplifting and came with immediate rewards. However, I have realized not all tasks, especially environmental ones, are so immediately rewarding.

In middle school, I had many environmentally conscious teachers that instilled in me the importance of thinking and acting "green." From that time on, I considered the environmental impacts of every decision I made, including where I bought my clothes, what I ate, how I traveled, and which drain I should adopt. This helped me find outlets to express my concern for the climate and wildlife, like Felidae Conservation Fund. I have aided this non-profit in a variety of ways and experienced first-hand the inefficient, underfunded, and under-appreciated world of environmental protection. I have become all-too-familiar with the common saga of years of paper-pushing only resulting in minor policy changes, or months of data collection being wasted because of disorganized database software.

The list of potential frustrations is endless, but so is my devotion to bettering the planet. Most conservation efforts do not provide the instant gratification of cleaning out a storm drain, but I am determined to achieve my environmental goals even if it takes years of hard work, dedication, and patience.

8. Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?

He darted toward the street. I chased after him, calling his name, but it was too late; I had time only to decide whether or not to watch.

Nine-year-old eyes open, I watched my dog get run over by a car.

Amidst the hysterical panic of my family and neighbors, I picked him up. His blood flowed out of his mouth and onto my forearm. My mom put us in the car. By the time we got to the hospital, he was gone. It was only as we walked out that I realized I wasn't wearing shoes.

Our friends were apologetic and comforting, but also in disbelief; they were shocked that I'd had the maturity to pick up my dying puppy. However, I didn't see this act as special. I simply felt that closing my eyes or waiting for an adult would have been cowardly, a way of disregarding the suffering of my own dog. Even then, I knew that desiring ignorance does not make a problem go away.

Since that time, I have continued to stay aware of the world around me and act instinctively, and this has led to my most rewarding experiences. It started with my diet. Despite the unsupportive attitudes from my family, I became a pescatarian and insisted our house consume less meat. It felt immoral to ignore what other animals were experiencing just so I could have steak for dinner.

My choice to abstain from meat was just the beginning. I persuaded my girlfriend to become a pescatarian. I boycotted foods that had packaging that wasn't recyclable. I participated in activities, like yoga, that were within walking distance of my house. I only purchased biodegradable doggy bags. My brother and I began carpooling to school with our neighbors. I adopted my storm drain. I pledged to buy only thrifted clothing. I began volunteering for an environmental non-profit. The list goes on.

These actions may seem infinitesimal, but each of us must believe that our small sacrifices make a difference. More than anything, it's my unwavering faith in this belief that makes me unique.