

ESM  
PREP

2021

# College Essay Guide

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## CHAPTER 1

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

*"The scariest moment is always just before you start."*

– Stephen King

**Y**ou'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.

**CHAPTER 2**

# 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 you-ness? Or does it simply elaborate upon an activity we’ve mentioned elsewhere?

## CHAPTER 3

# Writing Exercises: Let's Warm Up

*"A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people."*

– Thomas Mann

**B**ut 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.<sup>1</sup>*

### 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

## Exercise I

Two truths and a lie: write down three “facts” about yourself, two that are true and one that isn’t. Then have your brainstorm buddy – mentor, coach, etc. – try to guess the lie.

## Exercise II

Freewriting Recycle: Do a 5-10 minute free write, then take your best sentence from that exercise, put it at the top of a new page, and do another 5-10 minute free write. Stuck on what to say? Check out the prompts on the next page.

## Exercise III

Do you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist? How does this stance impact your life? 5-10 min.

## CHAPTER 4

# Let's Brainstorm

**A**nswer **ALL of the next 12 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. My motto is...
2. The most important trait in a true friend is...
3. I lose track of time when I'm...
4. I was really proud of myself when...
5. I've always wanted to...

## Short Answer:

1. Though you likely have lots of ideas about your future, what's the one quality you'll always strive to embody? Why?
2. What's an element of your culture, ancestry, or upbringing that you value and why?
3. Describe a time you were surprised—by yourself or by some-

one else—and learned something from a misconception or assumption you'd had.

4. What do you think your parents would say is your best quality?
5. When do you have the most fun?
6. What are two goals you've accomplished, and how did you accomplish them?
7. If you could write a letter to yourself as an incoming freshman in high school, what advice would you give? What lessons have you learned, and what would you do differently?

## 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 time you took a risk and stepped out of your comfort zone
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

**CHAPTER 5**

# 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?

## CHAPTER 6

# Drafting Process

*“One day I will find the right words, and they will be simple.”*

– Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

**T**he time has come. Look through your brainstorm, 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:**

Once you’ve identified the quality/qualities you’re working with, then you can begin to consider how best to convey that quality. Your brainstorm should help you determine which anecdote(s) will best serve this thesis. **This combination of anecdote + thesis is one that will create a rich, you-specific essay. See the next page for clarification of this idea.**

## 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

## CHAPTER 7

# Keeping it Original: The Complexity of Combinations

One of a student's greatest fears is "writing something that everyone is writing about." Honestly, it's a warranted concern. **But the best way to differentiate yourself is to be yourself, and the best way to be yourself is to showcase as much authenticity as possible.**

**How?** Convey a sense of nuance while conveying your sense of self.

**Create a narrative that offers a holistic representation of who you are by combining two simpler ideas. This can help to create a more complex conveyance of your identity.**

Let's begin with a **simple idea**: "I collect shells."

Great! That's a nice hobby. But, in and of itself, it falls a little flat.

Let's take a look at our traits list to find **another simple idea**:

"I'm a perfectionist."

OK. Interesting, but we've read a lot of essays about overcoming perfectionism, so it's challenging to create an original piece while just exploring this obstacle.

**What if we combined them?**

*I'm a perfectionist who's learned balance through my hobby, shell collecting.*

Now we have the potential to offer something that's uniquely you. **See the next page for a sample of this essay in its entirety.**

## Simple Traits

- I'm open-minded
- I pride myself on my grit
- I like to be the peacemaker
- I'm a committed agent for change
- My guiding principle is compassion

## Simple Anecdotes

- I've started a club
- I'm a swimmer
- I have a medical condition
- I do model UN
- I love animals
- My family is multicultural

## Sample: The Complexity of Combinations

An expanse of pale sand invited further exploration—the shore ran along the coastline, interrupted momentarily by a flimsy pier, a faded lighthouse. Bucket in hand, not even the squawking birds could divert my attention. Lightning whelks, lettered olives, and crown conchs all vied for my attention...

Shell hunting. In theory, it was just a stroll on the beach—sounds tranquil, I know. Sounds like an ideal way to soften my methodical, ultra-organized edges, right? That's what I continually tried to convince myself, but nonetheless, after each jaunt, I still spent hours classifying and sorting my shells. When I began this hobby at age four, I picked up every shell in sight, but with each subsequent outing, my requirements expanded. At this stage of my shell hunting career, I combed the shores solely for exquisite specimens.

My spring break had become a scientific process of assessment—I inspected a lace murex in excellent condition. I dropped the shell: a minor chip had eclipsed its beauty. Plus, I already had a better one stored away—it was useless in extending the breadth of my collection. It wasn't the infamous Junonia, after all: a shell hunter's dream.

Why did I deny so many shells, each a unique natural wonder? Why did I scrutinize them, only to be disappointed by a small flaw? In my pursuit of a robust collection, I tuned out the waves' rhythmic crash.

I pulled my squinted eyes from the smattering of shells and saw the water, barely blue under the rising sun. As I inhaled, salt lingering in my lungs, I tried to sink into the moment.

Instead, I thought about my post-it notes, pen organizers, folders, and to-do lists: items that categorize my time and space. I contemplated the labels I'd come to apply to myself: soccer player, bullet-journaler, hard worker. Labels I couldn't separate from my drive toward success and excellence. But I am also an artist. A creative. These are labels meant to celebrate freedom, imagination, and flaws—a state of being where I wasn't required to sort and plan. I managed to do so anyway.

As an artist, I was often impeded by my penchant for detail—my pursuit of realism hindered my artistic freedom. I had always appreciated a detail-oriented piece, but somewhere along the erased lines and crumpled sketchbook paper, I lost my passion for the act of simply creating.

Aiming to rediscover art's tranquility, I grasped onto the salty breeze permeating my spring break memories and dove in, trading my precise drawing pencil for a watercolor brush. It felt foreign in my hand—I'd long avoided the loose lines and imperfect forms of this unpredictable medium. I dabbed the brush onto the paper and was rewarded with the same dynamic quality of the ocean. The diluted hues danced—a stark contrast to a pencil's indelible scars. In shelving my pursuit of artistic perfection, I rediscovered the sensation of relaying feeling with art. I was unbounded by the pressure to be exact, and, ironically, my form gained more dimension, exhibiting a life-like quality I failed to achieve before.

Finding balance through watercolor has not erased my desire to be detail-oriented. However, I've come to embrace the value of unbridled creation, of stepping back from the details to situate my perspective. My creativity, when blended with my passion for nuance, empowers my learning and problem-solving by adding

new layers of understanding.

I still relish my shells, although in a different way. Once “specimens,” they now prompt contemplation, reminding me of the bigger picture. I no longer shell hunt; I *collect* shells. My collection has morphed into one that elicits feeling, and as it continues to evolve, so do I. In looking to the waves dotting the horizon of my future, I know I’ll invoke a balance—between nuance and the abstract, sharp edges and gentle curves, pencil and watercolor—to design creative solutions and to confront challenges along the way.

## CHAPTER 8

# Common App Essay Prompts

Here are the Common App's prompts—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. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this

gratitude affected or motivated you?

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.

## CHAPTER 9

# Starting Your First Draft

**“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.

**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.

**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?

## CHAPTER 10

# 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

## CHAPTER 11

# Supplements

*"We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect."*

– Anaïs Nin

Your supplements are a great opportunity to round yourself out—to cover the ground you missed in your personal statement, to elaborate on the activity that the Common App's Twitter-length character limit stifled, 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 you're 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."

## 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 1000 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.

## CHAPTER 12

# Personal Narrative

## Samples & Critical Reading Exercise

### Critical Reading Exercise

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

- Annotate for details or language that stands out to you
- Map out the structure of each: how does it begin? How does it end?
- How would you identify the tone and voice of each?
- Note any imagery or interesting descriptions.
- Note any stylistic choices you notice.
- What do you like about them? What are you not into?
- 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

Imagine walking around with double vision all day, every day.

When I describe my vision to people, I'll often point to some object--be it a person or the whiteboard in class--and explain that I often see two diverging images of that one object. Whether I'm walking down the street or solving a puzzle, my eyes are constantly straining to adjust to the images before them. When reading, I have to strain my eyes to obtain "normal" vision. Oftentimes, it seems as if the book is a giant moving barcode because my eyes see two of each word in an overlapping image.

Through the keen observation of my second-grade teacher and my mom, I began a long series of evaluations from my pediatrician, educational psychologist, speech therapist, and multiple optometrists. It was a relief to finally be diagnosed at the age of eight with High Exophoria, a congenital condition where my eyes naturally rest outward. That is, in order to obtain binocular vision, which naturally occurs for everyone else, I needed to "cross" my eyes to bring them forward.

I diligently attended weekly therapy sessions at the Berkeley Binocular Vision Clinic every Saturday morning for over half a year. Each week, I practiced a set of five accommodation and convergence exercises that increased in difficulty as my eye muscles became stronger. By increasing the strength of my eye muscles, I was finally able to function symptom-free.

However, when I began my reading-intensive AP courses, my symptoms returned in full force. My eyes were constantly fatigued due to the small-print textbooks and handouts, combined with the numerous hours of homework. I knew that, in order to be academically successful, I would have to do everything in my power to mitigate the symptoms. Once again, I practiced convergence and accommodation eye exercises taught to me at the vision clinic to strengthen my eye muscles two to three times a day. Knowing that accommodations would not always be available for me, I learned to advocate for myself by keeping my 504 Plan active and communicating my needs to my teachers. I would request a seat in the front and center of the classroom so that I could easily read the board. To reduce eye strain,

I requested large-print tests and digital versions of materials when available. When these materials were unavailable, I used a full-page magnifier while reading and frequently rested my eyes during long study sessions.

My advocacy stretched beyond my personal needs. Growing up with my disability has given me the gift of recognizing others with similar challenges and helping them overcome these barriers. While mentoring an elementary school robotics team, I quickly took notice of a quiet little boy who seemed to struggle keeping up with the others. Recognizing similarities to myself as a child, I realized that he had some learning disabilities himself, and approached the parents. We arranged a meeting outside of robotics practices to discuss this, where I shared experiences about my learning difficulties, the techniques I used to overcome them, and how advocating for a 504 plan helped me grow. Now, the parents are working to get the boy the needed accommodations as I teach this young boy techniques to overcome his difficulties.

I may be slow in the uptake, but I am confident that my hard work and persistence has and will continue to lead me to great success. Instead of looking at my eye condition as a disadvantage, I think of it as a blessing. Whereas I have literal visual challenges, others may have figurative visual challenges. My high exophoria has given me a unique view of the world; I notice details others do not perceive.

Thanks to the circumstances I have been presented with, I have developed a strong work ethic, empathy for students with learning difficulties, and newfound confidence that I can overcome any challenge I face.

## Sample 2

In 2017, my family moved to London, 4,000 miles closer to Iran. We took the tube to *Hafez*: I finally lived in a city with Persian

restaurants. The waiter handed us the menus as he greeted us in farsi. We all watched my mother as she flipped through and ordered too many dishes for the table--mapping out a culinary journey through Iran. While we waited for the food, I surveyed the room. I let my eyes linger on the hanging silverware and romantic tapestries framed on the wall. My mother's eyes lit up as the waiter set down the *zereshk polow*, *jujeh kababs*, and *fe-senjan*. I remembered how hungry I was. Amongst the eccentric colors of the food and rich scent of the spices, I felt at home.

I have never been to Iran, and even though I know how to de-seed a pomegranate and flip a *tahdig*, I have never fully accepted my Iranian heritage. I have never wandered under the mosaic-tiled arches and gold-dipped spires of a mosque, and my German last name--de Beer--alienated me from my Shahidi relatives. I never looked, sounded, or felt the part. Until now.

I was born and raised in Brazil, moved to Spain, whisked to Panama, and planted in London. When I lived in South America, it felt natural to champion my father's Jewish-Argentinian heritage. I was exposed to a community of individuals who were more tolerant of my Latino-hispanic origins. In my attempts to assimilate into my surrounding society, I grew ignorant of a crucial piece of my identity. I was torn between accepting and being accepted, and my choice inevitably imposed on my relationship with Iran.

The fact that my mother was a Muslim-converted-Jew also set me apart from my Iranian family. It was hard to familiarize myself with a religion that my mother had given up years ago. I allowed myself to develop a sense of religious ignorance, categorizing my mother's cultural past as something that was foreign. It was an unconscious attempt to conceal half of my identity, reinforced by the lack of a Persian community around me.

Today, I have the privilege of living within walking distance from Saffron Pastries, where Mr. Ali stuffs boxes with dozens of airy cream puffs while his wife fills her wicker baskets with pistachios. This new accessibility to Persian food has fed me the confidence to further embrace the culture I had been so quick

to dismiss. Now, when I walk down St. John's Wood High Street, I can recognize snippets of coffee chats in Farsi: my lips have grown accustomed to pronouncing the long vowels and elastic consonants of the elaborate language. I can celebrate *Nowruz* with my Persian cousins: together, we jump over fires and paint delicate eggshells with intricate paisley motifs from our childhood.

Although we love to indulge at *Hafez*, my mother and I also like to cook. Cooking chicken *khoresh* has now become a family tradition, and from it I have practiced patience and improvisation. We inaugurated our London kitchen with the aromas of Iran, our fingers dancing above the broth as every pinch of spice drew me in further. Persian cuisine has become my cultural sanctuary--a gateway into the streets of Tehran, Mashad, and Shiraz.

Now, as I reflect on my heritage, I am proud to call myself half Iranian. I have learned to break down the walls that stood between me and my culture, instead striving to explore connections and build bridges. I no longer face an internal dichotomy: my cultural struggle has taught me to be unapologetically diverse, and to share this acceptance with others. My fear of being ostracized on account of my identity has deepened my desire to cultivate inclusive environments wherever I go. Maybe next Yom Kippur--Jewish day of atonement--my family can breakfast at *Hafez*.

### Sample 3

The sweating started again and I couldn't stop my eyes from darting back and forth. Anxiety is not unfamiliar to me, but I had never before experienced that butterfly sensation while doing

something so basic. I finally snapped out of my uneasy trance, parked my car, locked up, and swiftly walked to the other side of the sloped, grassy area. My heart pounded--the kind of elevated rate that I might feel before an interview or football game--only, I was at a park playing Pokémon Go on a Sunday at 4:00pm in the afternoon.

Like everything else in life, Pokémon Go is better with friends. Yet it was hard for me to admit this particular hobby to my crew, especially as most of my core guy-friends are your proverbial jocks. They would have told me to *Pokémon Go Away* if I'd asked, and their not-quite-but-almost-bully hive mentality would have had no problem putting me down regardless of my heightened vulnerability. So I turned to *Google* and asked, "how to meet people playing Pokémon Go?" That immediately led me to a local *Discord* server, where I was promptly flooded with messages of people "heading out" and "looking for some friends!", just as I was. That was how, later that week, I nervously went to my first meetup with someone named *Ducks3539* at a nearby park.

I was so caught up over-analyzing every potential negative situation that I failed to notice a woman walking directly towards me. I was stunned. *Ducks3539* was a 66-year-old woman who had been avidly playing for three years. She was as amiable as strangers come, and I am proud to say that *Ducks*, or *Patty*, as she is known in the real world, and I are now friends. We usually gather on alternating Sundays to complete difficult group quests, yet when I head home in the evening, it's our talks about life I remember most.

Now, I know all about her grandson Daniel, an adept guitarist who struggles to stay focused amidst his technology addiction, and about her amazing new senior living community. She knows all about my siblings, my parents, and my dog, Bear. I have also vented to her about my dismay at the fact that I can't tell any of my friends about my incredibly enjoyable, revived interest without the risk of scrutiny and ridicule. We've really come to share a constantly-blossoming, unconventional friendship. And it hasn't

been the only one I've formed. I meet new people every weekend: entire families who play together, young and old couples, and sometimes kids my own age. What I love most about our community is the nonjudgement; no competitive drive interferes with our teamwork and so events are not only a great way to get ahead in the game, but also a wonderful place to meet a variety of people, hear their stories, and reflect over our shared love for the simple app. This makes it the polar opposite of hanging out with my high school friends.

Making friends with Patty and other adults has boosted my confidence, enough so that I actually think it has impacted my professional life. When I interviewed for my internship at a Real Estate Investment Trust Analytics company in May, I was much less intimidated by the adults in the room than I would have been a year ago, because, in my head, I told myself I was just talking to four Pattys.

It was hard to admit to myself that I really enjoyed such an "outdated" and "nerdy" interest as PoGo, especially given the constant social pressure 3-sport athletes face from peers who would rather put you down than listen to you. Then, I realized that their opinions are insignificant, because anyone who is willing to take time out of their day to *poké fun* at me doesn't deserve a second of mine.

## Sample 4

Sitting at our small, circular dining table, I could see both my father's silver Menorah and my mother's portrait of King Bhumibol. Before me, my mother's Rat Na, a traditional Thai noodle dish, sat half-finished. My mother looked at me. "Finish your food,"

she said. I asked her, "Why?" My parents, at the same time, replied differently. My father always rewarded inquisitive behavior with a well thought out answer. My mother, however, would see his compliance with my questions as disrespect to elders, to which he responded: "To be Jewish is to ask why." Growing up, I experienced a blend of authority and skepticism that encapsulates the culture clash that I grew up within.

It was a strange experience for me growing up in a fusion of Jewish and Thai culture. The conflicting cultures of Thai obedience to authority versus the always-questioning nature of Judaism created a hybrid point of view that shaped my developmental years. My maternal grandmother was a devout Buddhist and conservative capitalist who escaped the civil strife of 1970s Thailand. My paternal grandmother, Ruth, had evaded death camps and the Gestapo, fleeing from Germany and eventually reaching salvation in America. She was scarred from her years escaping Germany and forever detested any form of absolute authority. Due to this fusion I grew up respecting tradition and my elders while also questioning how to better archaic inefficiencies. I experienced how different backgrounds shape different beliefs and lived in the tension of different viewpoints. To me, this was America.

I want to give back to the country that has offered so much to me. Since the beginning of high school, I have been enrolled in my school's political science academy: CIVITAS. In this academy, we take courses in Political Science, State and Local Politics, International Relations, and Philosophy. During these courses, we often debate the validity of policy and even formed a mock United Nations. During class, we had discussions about heated topics and policy without resorting to ad hominem or fear-mongering. In regard to partisan issues we as a class often came up with bi-partisan solutions. The collaboration between opposing ideals reminded me of my own household.

Recently I went to Boys State, an excellent program hosted by the American Legion. I could feel the physical embodiment of

patriotism flow through me as all 1000 boys sang the national anthem in tandem with the band. Boys State showed me that America has a bright future. Being in CIVITAS and going to Boys State gave me a glimpse of what America has lost over the years, but it also gave me hope that if we as a generation can work together, America can regain cohesion lost in the translation of politics.

Many of these experiences have given me new perspectives on issues that many Americans face. Most recently I have interned for Congressman Tom McClintock and Senator Jim Nielsen. As an intern for both, I worked on a constituent response, which allowed me the opportunity to read about issues that are not discussed on a national level but heavily affect many Americans.

All Jews grow up with the Hebrew word Mitzvah or “good deed” ingrained in their mind. I was always taught to seek and perform acts of Mitzvah wherever they may be. Dedicating myself to clubs and internships has offered me the opportunity to provide Mitzvah. I am able to directly help others in need while ignoring the politics that brought them to a state in which they need help. Whether it’s being a child of an immigrant, member of Civitas, intern, or vice president of Key Club, my experiences have helped me to realize that my real passion is helping people regardless of cultural background or political belief. If people of different cultures, languages, and nationalities can thrive together in America, it shouldn’t be impossible to fix problems caused by a difference of opinion.

## Sample 5

I could hear her typing on the other side of the closed door. Tap, tap, tap. I patiently waited for something, anything to indicate what she was trying to communicate. At last I heard it. Spoken in a robotic voice were the words, “Bella, we will eat you now for breakfast.”

I laughed, knowing instantly what my Japanese host mom was trying to communicate and took out my phone so I could translate a reply.

Over breakfast I called upon my friend Google Translate to ask them a plethora of questions. How long have you lived in Warabi? Where did your children go to school? What are they talking about on the TV? Only half end up being answered due to the language barrier.

The desire I have for human connection is what brought me to Japan. My innate love of understanding and relating to people, even those who live across the world, is why I am desperate to learn more languages and travel to new places. I’ve come to understand my passion for relating to others through the concept of stories. Stories are one means in which we connect and relate with one another. Stories can be told in a variety of ways: verbal retellings, television and movies, music, art, history, etc. I cling onto and over-analyse each of these methods in a desperate attempt to understand myself and the world through others.

My preoccupation in other’s stories has recently developed in a curiosity surrounding my own story. While on my school’s senior Kairos retreat, I was posed with the question: Who am I? While my classmate gave a speech on what identity meant to her, I sat back in my chair, closed my eyes, and thought hard on this question.

I realized that I have a story to tell. A story amassed from my experiences and all that I have learned from them. From travelling, I’ve learned that I value other cultures and languages and wish to constantly increase my knowledge about the world and the diverse range of people within it. From going to school and participating in Model United Nations, I’ve learned that I continuously want to be in a state of curiosity where I am constantly learning and growing. From my advocacy work in local and national politics, I’ve learned that I wish to understand others, even those

with differing opinions or political views, however defensive I may be when first faced with ideas that I don't agree with.

It was during this moment that my love of stories was brought into clarity. I recognized for the first time that two of my central passions--stories and international relations--originate from the same place. It was as if all my involvement in Model UN, SA-COG, local government, suddenly fell into place. I saw how both stories and international relations are rooted in empathy and a desire to learn about the world around me. International relations is more than just studying politics worldwide; it's about studying and understanding people. I'm passionate about global affairs because it focuses on individual stories making up a larger picture.

At the end of my stay in Warabi, Japan, my host family said that I was now a part of their "kazoku," or family. They proceeded to gift me a red stamp, marked with the Japanese symbol of their last name. I left Japan knowing I was now part of a new community halfway across the world.

One day, I hope to go back to Japan and talk with my host family, without Google Translate. I will tell them how much their own story means to me.

## Sample 6

At thirteen I sat in a small room tightly gripping my mother's hand as the surgeon began to list which options remained to us. I felt my hamstrings tighten with fear; stinging tears begin to well up in my eyes. My acute scoliosis, which before had been nothing more than an awkward-sounding diagnosis full of medical jargon, had suddenly become a pertinent, life-threatening issue.

I felt helpless, like my scoliosis had spun my life out of control in a way which I could not slow down. While I faced a daunting and physically challenging obstacle, I chose to work relentlessly to find another solution rather than accepting the choice I was given.

For as long as I can remember I've had a general interest in medicine, whether it was reading the contents of medications or analyzing the biomechanics of my ankle. In the wake of my diagnosis, however, curiosities about the side effects of spinal surgeries were no longer just answers on an online Google forum, but real-life consequences I would have to prepare myself to experience. Eventually, I did find an alternative: an experimental surgery which included prying my ribs apart, temporarily deflating my right lung, and tensioning a cord tethered to screws drilled into my vertebrae. It was the perfect concoction of innovation and risk, and I knew it was the surgery that I needed and wanted. Electing to undergo that particular surgery over the other procedure was one of the best decisions I've ever made.

Laying in bed after my surgery, in pain but with the certainty that I had made the right choice, I realized that I loved the couple of months prior to the operation. My days had been full of long doctors appointments with discussions of how the optimal procedure could be done. I was researching valuable information that was important to my own health in real time. It was as crucial to my overall well-being as it was in satisfying my own curiosity. Despite the fear and uncertainty, I felt more alive in those months than ever before.

This experience accelerated my interest in medicine to an insatiable level. I now participate in as many medically related activities as I can, like the annual BIO engineering high school competition at the University of California at Berkeley. Last year a few friends and I decided to enter the competition, and I had a fulfilling time inventing and proposing a hypothetical treatment for Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease for which there are currently no effective treatments. I also volunteer once a week at UCSF Chil-

dren's Hospital in Oakland, in the sports medicine department, adjacent to the room where I was first told that I had Scoliosis.

More recently, I was diagnosed with a sarcoma growing toward my lung, in between the ribs which had spread apart during my scoliosis-corrective surgery. This diagnosis is the presentation of a new medical challenge which I will research and discuss in an effort to further my medical knowledge as well as take care of myself.

Although my medical issues have been extremely challenging, they have given me a sense of direction in life. I love the idea of working in a hospital environment in the future, treating kids dealing with issues like those I've faced.

My appointments have changed. I am no longer the 13-year-old fearfully gripping his mother's hand. Now, my appointments consist of discussions with oncologists on how high frequency ultrasonic waves could be used to eradicate my tumor. And while having a growing tumor inside of me is incredibly scary, I am working my hardest to thoroughly enjoy my journey to treatment. For now, I will sponge up as much information through my medical encounters as I can which will provide me with insight into how I can help patients like myself in the future.

## Sample 7

Everyone says it's awful, but I loved middle school. I danced at recess. I came up with my own accent (think Swedish baby). I was tall and skinny with legs up to my earlobes. I didn't care what anyone thought about my singing, my side bangs or my wonder woman socks with red capes. I left the house without looking in the mirror, would invite anyone over to play, and tried every sport our school offered. I threw on whatever clothes my

fingers touched first. Monday, it was a neon romper with a tie dye shirt. Tuesday, it was Nike athletic shorts and polka dot leggings. And Wednesday, it was a slicked-back side ponytail. Bottom line was, I didn't think twice about fitting in.

Then came high school, and along with it, a flood of self-consciousness. An inner critic was born: are you really joining that group chat? Aren't you too old to wear your brother's sweat-shirt? Your eyebrows are invisible. I had a sudden urge to conform. The job of every day was to fit in. I questioned my friend group, fought with my mother over dying my eyebrows, and through it all, lost that free-spirited, bony middle-schooler. I was miserable. Something inside of me had changed and I couldn't stop myself from analyzing my social status and adapting to those around me. After two grueling years of nearly drowning in social pressures, I had to get out.

The summer after sophomore year, I flew across the country by myself to New York City, away from all of the comparing and ranking. I began an internship at Loeffler Randall, a start-up fashion brand in SoHo, hoping to regain a fraction of the self-confidence I once had. I didn't know how much I could add, but after listening and watching for a few days, I found myself sharing ideas in meetings. I had an opinion about velvet or pleated kitten toe heels. When asked to pair new handbags with designer clothing, I tapped into the creative side of myself that I had been too afraid to express. In the sweltering heat of the city, I ran late nights errands at Party City and jumped on the subway to pick up fabric across town, smiling through it all.

Summer was over. I worried if I could bring this new person back to my small hometown. For the first time in two years, I felt like me again. Landing in California, I wanted everyone to see who I really was. So, I steered clear of the conforming crowd. While my friends were out on Friday nights, I opened a sketchbook, drew designs and taught myself to sew. Three weeks into the school year, I proposed a new club called Repurpose Runway. I found a faculty sponsor and recruited members with the goal

of repurposing used clothing into fun and sustainable fashion. That spring, our club held its first annual “Rising Figures” fashion show. We featured ten students, from a cancer survivor to a feminist leader to an LGBTQ trailblazer. I stood up in front of all my peers—people I had once feared so deeply—in my homemade clothes, thanking everyone for coming together to raise \$6,620 for Bay Area Women Against Rape.

After a hundred people came and went, I finally had a moment to myself. I looked in the mirror and thought that stick-thin, free-spirited, fearless girl is back. I’d held on to my gutsy spirit from New York, started a new club at my school, and pulled off a successful fundraiser in front of my family and friends. People couldn’t believe that I had “raised over \$6,000”, but the sentence that I heard that day that made me the happiest was, “Sally Miller, you haven’t changed a bit since middle school.”

## Sample 8

I awake to the sound of my digital alarm clock buzzing at 5:30 AM. Rubbing my eyes, I contemplate whether or not I should get up. As I roll out of bed, dress myself, and begin my drive across the Bay Bridge, this fatigue stays with me. I often find myself in this situation on the weekend, rising before dawn to beat the traffic and the crowd, all to get to the San Francisco Bay before I can second guess my decision.

I approach the water barefooted, coping with the numbing sensations of the tide lapping at my feet and the lingering chill of the morning fog, and with one powerful leap, I’m in. All feeling and concentration in my body are now on the biting cold surrounding me as I swim faster and further away from shore, attempting to regain some treasured body heat and separate myself from the cooler shallow waters.

I choose to do this, to wake up early, to endure the unforgiving elements, and to swim in open water because I love it. I love the feeling of accomplishment it gives me, how it improves my athletic drive, and ultimately, who I am as an individual. My passion for open-water swimming is deeply rooted in how it forces me to sharpen my senses and put mind over matter. It has helped me build both my physical and mental tenacity.

I began swimming in the bay no more than five years ago with my father; he introduced me to the sport through both casual swims and competition. Though I have always been close with my father, open-water swimming helped to strengthen our relationship tremendously, and I have come to cherish this aspect of the sport. One fall morning two years ago, we stopped near the end of our swim to admire the Golden Gate Bridge though the receding fog, a perspective very few people get to admire. I vividly remember my father saying “you know, when swimming in the sea opposed to a lane pool, you gain an unrivaled sense of beauty for the environment that you’re in, one that can never be taken away”. This stuck with me, not only because it was true, not only because it came from a man whom I held the utmost respect for, but because it helped me, after much thought, fully comprehend why I do this. The talent, sportsmanship, and connection with the ocean combine within me to offer a feeling that is simply irreplaceable.

The character and attitude that open water swimming has helped me build has aided me in many aspects of my life, both in and out of the water. Throughout my high school academic career I have taken the mental tenacity I developed in the open

water and applied it when faced with obstacles and challenges. It has also helped me in my personal life by making me more confident in myself and in my perspective on the world. I still hold dear to me where this passion came from and how it makes me who I am. To this day, open water swimming continues to supplement my love of athleticism and the sea. It brings me back to the water almost every weekend, building my connection to the sport, my own family, and the beautiful area that I live in.

I return to shore, hustling up the sand away from the receding tide to retrieve my towel. The city streets and skylines of San Francisco are only now just beginning to come to life. I'm glad to be awake.

## CHAPTER 13

# School Supplements:

# Why X? Samples

**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.

**While arguing a Dartmouth-related case before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1818, Daniel Webster, Class of 1801, delivered this memorable line: "It is, Sir...a small college. And yet, there are those who love it!" As you seek admission to the Class of 2024, what aspects of the College's program, community or campus environment attract your interest? \* (100 words)**

Aside from the D-Plan and engineering research opportunities

for first-years, Dartmouth's unwavering sense of community is particularly appealing to me. I view the Green as a physical space for connection, a manifestation of a unique, outdoorsy sense of community. The Green—despite changes to the Homecoming tradition over the years—endures as a beacon of the undeniable Dartmouth spirit. Furthermore, as a proponent of eco-compatibility, I'm inspired by Dartmouth's sustainability efforts and leadership, which empower students to take concrete action. From the O Farm to the Irving Institute, Dartmouth emphasizes collaboration—an aspect of community I see as integral to generating meaningful change.

**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)**

I'm inspired by ventures that have impact—positive impact—and I'm someone who pushes for a better tomorrow. Every day, stories are told, truths are exposed, and voices are heard. Journalism has the power to unite and to educate across borders and cultures—NYU, with its renowned multimedia news sources and journalistic opportunity, is the ideal setting to become a connective truth teller.

Though I'm entering NYU undeclared, one of the aspects of an NYU education is its multi-faceted academic approach; with this in mind, I'm particularly interested in the ways that NYU creates professional learning opportunities. Immersed in our nation's journalism hub, New York City constantly generates vital content that shapes the way we, as global citizens, view the world. At NYU, opportunities such as the Credit Internship Course offer students a real-world, application driven education in the workplace. As a hands-on, visual learner, I'm drawn to this chance to try my hand in the fields I'm passionate about.

Back in the classroom, I am particularly interested in courses like Carol Sternhell's "Journalism & Society: Women and the Media." Coming from Archer's all-female learning environment, examining women in media has been a challenging, fascinating topic. Last year, we wrote to Carl's Jr. every day for 365 days condemning their use of oversexualized portrayals of women—I'm ready to bring this same determined advocacy to NYU's community. Courses like this, in a community like NYU's, will enrich my existing passion for advocacy and expression awareness, engaging me in rich dialogues from varied perspectives.

As a student growing up in Los Angeles, my diverse community inspired my interests—my high school hosts students from 75 zip codes. This led me to write a research piece, "Socioeconomic status in our community," for my school's paper. I spoke to faculty and students regarding the discomfort surrounding this topic and how it shaped the current uniform policy. Since its

publication, my piece won the Nelly Bly Reporting Award and has been mandatory reading for several classes, igniting a conversation about socioeconomic status in our community. I believe that the challenging topics need to be addressed and the unheard voices need to be heard. "Perstare et praestare," to persevere and to excel, for the future, past and present. As a student and a citizen of this world, I believe that the ability to excel comes from the power of perseverance. As a writer and aspiring journalist, NYU's motto is especially potent.

**CHAPTER 14****UC Sample 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.**

I have been fortunate enough to grow up in a family where I have been taught that I could accomplish whatever I put my mind to: my gender has never been a limiting factor. But living in a variety of countries and communities has shown me that this is not the case for everyone, and that systemic, gender-based discrimination is the norm throughout many areas of the world.

During my sophomore year, I was reintroduced to the Girl Up Foundation--a foundation I'd known from personal experience previously because they'd helped my friend in Noida gain access to education and changed her life forever. I was immediately compelled to create my own Girl Up Club within my community, and this encouraged me to found the Woodside Priory Girl Up Club. Through this club I have met a myriad of passionate, opinionated, and strong women who have shaped my perspective and encouraged me to become an advocate for change.

I was inspired to add my own special twist to this club, furthering its reach to helping women gain experience in STEM fields. I've worked to set up clubs aimed at helping tutor girls in need of assistance in school, and I've continued fundraising. I have organized bake sales, 5k runs, and more, but what I am most proud of is the panel of speakers that I have helped develop. "Imposter Syndrome" is something that a lot of women feel--these ideas of inadequacy and self doubt can hold one back, and unfortunately they're ideas that are perpetuated through society. I reached out to a variety of experts in the field of women's rights and stud-

ies and am creating a panel of speakers to discuss "Imposter Syndrome" and similar issues in order to give women a platform to tell their stories and use their voices to advocate for change. Founding Girl Up has permanently changed my perspective and worldview, showing me that I could initiate change in my community and exemplifying the ways that my beliefs and passions can manifest themselves into the world.

**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.**

Beyond serving as a medium for me to communicate otherwise ineffable concepts, art connects me to others and transforms my voice into an agent for change. Art's accessibility inspired me to investigate its intersections with activism. While art can generate solitary space, it can also unite individuals and catalyze their involvement in a variety of issues.

Alongside one of my similarly-minded classmates, I developed a club--named ArtVocate, a combination of "art" and "advocate"--to allow students to glean the benefits of communicating a specific message through their preferred form of visual art or creative expression. We engage the larger school community in accessible projects to foster creativity and advocacy regardless of artistic ability. For example, ArtVocate created a school-wide project that allowed students to reflect on what brings them joy in a visual format.

Furthermore, by hosting gallery shows on current issues and leading field trips to explore external uses of art for the purpose of advocacy, the club encourages students to treat art as social commentary. Our current show is centered around the theme of injustice. In order to engage the school, we polled students and eventually decided to feature youth environmental activist Greta Thunberg in a bold community art piece. Additionally, through

the workshops we organize and run, ArtVocate seeks to add a dynamic quality to the meaning of art by introducing alternative forms of creative expression, such as eco-friendly tie-dye and yarn storming. As a leader of the club, I strive to expand the basic definition of art, which not only encapsulates beauty and aesthetic but also acts as a vehicle for action, change, and progress.

I choose to express my creative side through various forms of art, as art transcends barriers and prompts me to consider the many facets of the content I'm painting or drawing. I consider what connotations different hues carry—I consider how I can incorporate a nuanced perspective on the issue I'm addressing in the piece. For me, art, in its many forms, promises copious room for wild imagination, invites me to explore untapped potential, and acts as a powerful mode of communication.

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

I love racing against time. I began swimming when I was four years old. I remember achieving all of the accomplishment badges much earlier than my friends, so naturally, I wanted to continue. I started individual training when I was six and joined the school team. I used to ask to swim with the boys because they were always faster than the girls, plus I had a sense of underlying competitiveness at that age. This helped to improve my competition skills and technique as I strived to be the best. My coach saw my potential and told me to swim more, so I joined the legendary Chelsea & Westminster Swim Club.

It was one of the best decisions that I made: it gave me access to multiple different race distances and allowed me to challenge myself and see which event I was best at. I entered national swimming competitions and placed well in my events. At my current school, I have had the opportunity to attend the ESSA swimming championships for seven years from the ages of 12 to 18.

In my final year on the team, I was selected as School Swimming Captain; within this role, I am responsible for helping with the organization of Galas and consistently leading my teammates. I like to consider myself a bridge between the swimmers and the coaches, but also as a motivator and supporter. I also hold various school records, such as the Senior 50m Breaststroke, 100m Individual Medley, and the 50m Freestyle.

I am extremely dedicated to the sport and spend four to five hours in the pool each week. I used to struggle to balance my academics with my swimming, alongside the other sports that I play, and would have to constantly communicate with coaches to figure out how to prioritize. As I have matured throughout high school, I have gotten used to my hectic timetable and can now safely say that I am able to keep on top of all my various sporting activities, as I continue to race against time.

### **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 contributonal, 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.**

Analyzing how we think, operate, learn and discover as human beings has always fascinated me. At the same time, I have always had a passion for music. These two subjects are not always related, but there are strong connections between the two that pushed my own mind to think and explore further. During my Junior Year in both my AP Biology and AP Psychology classes, we had units on Neuroscience. We studied how sound is perceived in the brain as well as how neurotransmitters contribute to the way we think and feel. After finding this connecting pathway

between my two passions, I took it upon myself to study further. At the end of AP Biology, when given the opportunity to explore our individual scientific inquiries, I combined my interests: writing, recording, and performing with researching, observing, and analyzing. It excites me that musical research can be conducted in the same manner as it can be in scientific fields. I learned that music not only increases activity in all regions of the brain, but it also raises serotonin, dopamine, and opioid levels—thus explaining why we feel happier when listening to music. Through further investigation, I found that music also helps to rediscover neural pathways—facilitating further internal connections that help us heal. As music therapy is becoming increasingly popular, the effects of music on the brain are important to research in further depth, as we have only begun to scratch the surface. This past summer, I read several books on music and the brain—including *Musophilia* and *This Is Your Brain on Music*—and this year I am focusing my Advanced Independent Research Colloquium project on the effects of music on neurotransmission as well as heart rate, and endorphin release. I hope to continue this research and further explore these passions throughout my years at university.

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

When I heard Boyan Slat, founder of The Ocean Cleanup, speak, I was fascinated by his plastic-collecting system's elegant design. Slat's dynamic solution is revolutionary—it uses the ocean's natural movement to combat pre-existing plastic pollution.

While I grew more excited and hopeful for the success of this large scale cleanup effort with each update or correspondence, I sought a way to contribute to The Ocean Cleanup's work and support its mission. Seeing that they did not have a volunteer program, I decided to create my own.

My organization, Oceans50, aims to provide youth with the information they need to actively combat the growing marine debris issue. By running an online fundraiser, I raised over three-thousand dollars to support The Ocean Cleanup. During the summer, I participated in numerous beach cleanups and spread the word. Additionally, I designed a website to inform youth on how they, too, could get involved and encourage eco-compatible lifestyles in their communities. After gaining a social media presence and sending out newsletters, I received messages from like-minded individuals asking to collaborate and from children interested in working with Oceans50.

I continue to research plastic pollution and share my findings on social media. I also help support my local Greentown organization's "Skip the Straw" campaign. Furthermore, my friends, classmates, and soccer teammates have been receptive to my suggestions of small lifestyle adjustments to reduce their use of disposable plastics, such as trading plastic wrap for beeswax wrap. I also aim to make others aware of the complexities of the marine debris issue (why biodegradable plastics aren't always effective, for example) in order to expand their knowledge beyond "#savetheturtles."

Although the results of my efforts may not result in the complete elimination of marine debris, I see my organization as a contribution, a step in the right direction. The many beach-goers that have expressed their gratitude for my cleaning the beach or the members of my community that show me how they're making a simple swap I suggested compel me to continue learning and progressing in my efforts to challenge the status quo of plastic use.

