

How To Write

The Perfect Personal Statement

Read 14 successful essays
by students who got into the Ivy League,
Duke, USC, NYU, UCLA, and more!



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What you need to know about the Personal Essay

In college applications, the personal statement holds a unique degree of importance. Top essays will offer a window into the student's character and personality - offering admissions officers a view of the student they may eventually admit. The statement brings to life the grades and accomplishments that color the rest of the application.

By bringing together some of our best students' essays, from different places and backgrounds, we want to provide both inspiration and a template for future students seeking to provide colleges a powerful statement about who they are. At Crimson, we are constantly amazed by the essays we read every year, the thoughtfulness of our students, and the power of their words.

To give full context to these essays - how they will be read, and why they matter - here are a couple guiding questions we think about with each of our students.

01. Why is the personal statement so important?

The personal statement is a reflection of broader application priorities. Top colleges and universities seek well-rounded students that will thrive in academic environments emphasizing plurality of thought and will bring different perspectives. This essay is about helping colleges understand who the student is - their formative experiences, their goals, and how they think about the world around them. More than any other part of the process, it is a window into their mind and thoughtfulness; empathy, and reflection, are prized highly.



The best Common App essays focus on insight and takeaways from an experience - rather than the experience itself. The essays are often humble and reflect a student's capacity to struggle with, and conquer, difficult concepts (rather than implying that the student is an expert or has nothing more to learn). By the personal statement, universities can identify who this person really is as an individual, and if they are the right fit for the institution and represents what they are looking for.

02. What kind of personal statement stands out to admissions officers?

A great personal statement has very little to do with the rest of the student's application. It should not reiterate other parts of the Common App. Unless there is a ton of additional context needed on an existing activity, students should shy away from touching on topics covered elsewhere and focus instead on explaining other parts of who they are. Statements should be authentic and reflective: what happened to the student is often less important than how they processed and understood it. Students can write about any topic they want - personal stories from their youth, how they think about important social issues, or their dreams and ambitions. The essays below reflect this, what unifies them is neither topic nor style but how honest they are and the picture the reader gets into the writer's mind and personality.



03. What are the common mistakes made by students - what shouldn't you focus on in your personal statement?

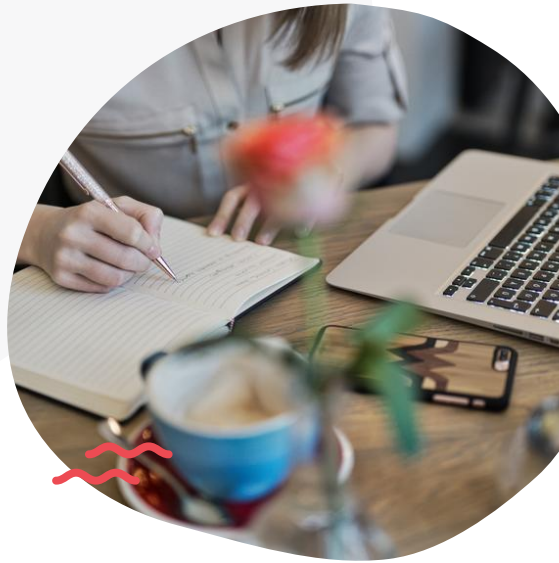
One common mistake is to assume that because the readers want to learn about the student as a person, the best topics to write about are difficult personal topics. While some of the essays below are compelling personal narratives about hardship, not all good personal statements take that form. If you are writing about hardship because you feel that's what they want to hear, and not because that is an authentic turning point in your life on which you have genuine reflection, it's likely not the right topic.



04. How does Crimson help their students create individually powered personal statements they can be proud of?

Here at Crimson, our work with students is centered on the premise of individual attention and taking real time to prepare the personal statement. Given the personal statement is one of the the most important parts of the application, Crimson can begin supporting their students in their essay preparation up to 8 months prior to the application deadline. We put each student through time-tested exercises and our own proprietary writing curriculum. That curriculum was created specifically to help students reflect and grow into the unique style of personal statement writing.

To support students best, Crimson will assign each student a handpicked writing tutor - called the Application Mentor - whose role is to mentor the student to produce the best possible essays. Along the way, the student will also get input from their Crimson Strategist and - at multiple junctures - Crimson's Essay Review Team, or ERT for short. The ERT is a team of leading writers including novelists, journalists, professors, and former admissions officers who provide anonymous feedback on the student's essay, giving a valuable second (and often, third!) voice so students can understand how their personal statement will land with the committee. This combination of award-winning talent and personalized approach has helped Crimson students beat the odds year after year at the world's top universities!



05. Any final words of advice?

Writing personal statements is difficult! The essay is the opportunity for the student to concisely explain the thesis of their application: why the college should take them. To tackle this well, you need to start early and take your time. Two techniques that help are:

1. Taking time to write by hand. Too many students write on their computer, where there are plenty of distractions and it's easy to get sidetracked. Put the computer away and write on paper. It will go slower, and that's okay! Slowing down gives you time to think and choose words carefully; success is measured by the quality of your essay, not how quickly you wrote it!
2. Take time to walk outside. Walking has been shown to activate and calm the brain - when you hit stumbling block, leave the page behind and take some time to think as you exercise. Often, by the time you get back you may have figured out the right words!

So are you ready to explore exactly what sorts of essays result in acceptance to the best schools in the world? Keep reading and good luck!



University of Pennsylvania & UCLA

by Chris Z.

"So, how is your brother's girlfriend doing...?" My dad dropped this bomb nonchalantly. The tarred road zoomed alongside us. Locked Doors. No cars for miles. This was code red. Searching for any and all signs of egress, I was in full panic mode over the impending inquisition.

Two hours into our drive to a rowing camp, we had already exhausted all the polite conversation. Each passing second became another potential opportunity for an awkward 'parent' question to open a treasure trove of personal embarrassment. I attempted a musical diversion. However, the cycle of the radio tuning wheel groaned as the paucity of stations gradually depleted from thirty options to now only two - static or Country. I chose static. Palms sweaty, I struggled to circumnavigate the wheel, but my swelling anxiety betrayed my incipience as a driver. Dad was not one to easily give up on a hunt for information. I needed to take the reins and steer us away from danger if I did not want to be next.

"Dad, have you ever considered what would happen if we could travel as fast as the speed of light?"

"Never crossed my mind."

"Theoretically speaking, time would slow down, distance between objects would shorten, and if this speed were maintained, our mass would increase exponentially. The most interesting part of it all is that we will never know if all these things even happened. It is logistically impossible to recreate."

"Great. What was your fastest rowing time last week?" Dad only cared about the possible. "Not quite the speed of light."

As Dad talked about rowing techniques, I zoned out. With my foot gently on the accelerator, I imagined the car gaining speed as we drove north. I thought about the earth moving, about the car zooming into space. If we reached the speed of light would everything stand still?

I hit the brakes! Inertia jolted us forward as the seat belts pulled us back to Earth.

"What's that about?"

"Sorry, Dad, I got distracted"

Settling in again, he asked: "So what will it take for your team to win this year?"

"Well, if all 8 of us each put our blades into the water at perfect 90 degree angles at exactly the same time, pull with the same force and exit the water in perfect unison, we would win.

He chuckled. "Even I know the chances of that happening are zero."

Yes, it is impossible, but the excitement is in trying to. Whether it is what happens to time at the speed of light or imagining how to calculate the perfect rowing technique, I am excited by the potential secrets and hidden possibilities lurking in deep thinking on big ideas and debates over detail.

University of Pennsylvania & UCLA (continued)

by Chris Z.

I love to dwell in the hypothetical: to investigate, question, and debate the unknowable, even if, my pursuit is futile—that I will ultimately fail. My salsa with the unanswerable delights me because the mystery of dancing with a phantom energizes my mind and ignites my imagination.

As a prospective university student I'd been pigeonholed into Commerce, Engineering, Science, or Art without being able to explore the intersections between disciplines. However, in a future where career paths are unknown, broader perspectives are crucial to facilitating greater innovation and more flexible thinking. Entwining a study of philosophy with language, computer studies, and math will allow me a multifaceted pursuit of unanswerable questions that energize and excite me, such as the Collatz Conjecture and whether it has potential for Artificial Intelligence.

As a prospective university student, I want to experience intellectual rigor as engagements with potential information rather than just facts to be memorized. I want to wonder with teachers and students who can pull with me, who want to drop blades in the water at perfect angles in perfect unison, all the while knowing that to do so is impossible.

Yale University

by *Bluebelle C.*

Goodsway Mooring was an oasis in hell. In London's urban wasteland, it was rare to find a community not destroyed by decades of urbanization—but ours had survived. In an area rife with poverty, addiction and seedy dealings advertised in back-page ads, we were the people who had picnics on our narrow-boat roofs and who named our pontoon 'Bluebelle's First Steps'. My family exhibited a similar dichotomy, finding comedy in the lack of space that meant my mom's cello was stored in the bathtub, and reveling in the storybook quality of having a cupboard for my bed. Such simple pleasures as feeding swans in the morning or waving goodbye to the moon at night were an easy distraction from the harsh reality surrounding us.

But the fairy-tale couldn't last forever. While we followed the legacy of poet and architectural preservation activist John Betjemen by resisting all council attempts to remove our leasehold, the value we found in this afterthought of the industrial revolution was not shared by governmental powers. When gentrification came to King's Cross, our attempt at a campaign was dwarfed by the bureaucratic machine of government inexorably marching towards a 'grand future' which had no place for us. New housing complexes promised to be far more lucrative than our cluster of boats, so the redevelopers wanted us gone—our stories forgotten and our lives erased. Far too quickly, it was all over. We moved onto land, and soon after, a flash flood sank 'The City of Truro', my first home.

I had been born on the water, lived and breathed the fantasy of a life where it was more commonplace to know a pirate than a banker, then lost it all. To a child raised on stories, it seemed obvious that my sunken home was the ultimate symbol that the contented and innocent life I had been blessed with was lost forever. I could no longer be ignorant, and so I opened my eyes to the injustices of the world and used my loss to spur my action against them. I wanted to speak out, and thanks to my debating coach, I learned how to do so in a way that would make others listen. Soon enough, I took action by founding my refugee pen-pal charity, 'Words Not Wars', and by joining the Camden Youth Council.

This new life of activism was far removed from the blissful indifference to the future that had defined my idyllic life as a 'boat baby', but I could never forget the loss that had made me the person who wouldn't sit by and ignore the problems of the world. This was made clear for me while filming a video for the 'London Needs You Alive' knife crime campaign in the high-rise, high-tech building of the Camden Council, 11 floors above the meandering canal that was once my home. Looking down at the murky water I had once built my life around, I realized I was standing in a building that would not exist had the King's Cross 'regeneration' not occurred, doing a job I never would have considered had I not been forced off the water.

This was when I realized the eviction battle was one I had not, in fact, lost. Yes, I'd lost my home, but I'd found my voice—and learned the importance of using it. The video being filmed revolved around our dreams for the future, so when filming began I spoke of my plans to start a radio network, one that would not only let me tell the stories I care about, but that would also sponsor grass-roots programs so that the most subjugated members of our society can seize control of their own narratives. No one deserves to be forgotten, no one should have the power to erase other's lives. I'm telling my story, but there are many more to find and share.

Georgia Institute of Technology

by Alfonso A.

I was still in shock.

My golf coach now taught me from a wheelchair. My sister's bangs were gone. The old Mickey Mouse dishes had been replaced by white porcelain ones. My room was no longer light blue and yellow, instead painted a dark navy. I was no longer part of my friends' most recent anecdotes. The main cook at my taco stand was gone.

That night I lay in a bed that didn't feel like mine, holding my breath, eyes wide open. All I could think of was the feeling of my chest being pumped with air and an urge to run away. I felt cold in the place where I had always felt warm, like I was trying to fit into a puzzle I was no longer a piece of. Was I at the right address? Or had I taken a trip to Mars like I have always wanted to and came back to see everything changed? This was still my house, but I didn't feel at home in it. How was that possible?

I left for boarding school when I was fifteen. Now, I was back for my third summer since then and three years of accumulated changes hit me like a basketball to the face. Moving away when you're that young is definitely a challenge with added responsibilities and having to live alone, but coming back and feeling like a foreigner in my own home was a far stranger experience. I felt paralyzed by how estranged I felt.

After some days of feeling completely alienated, I was practicing with my now wheelchair-bound golf coach and couldn't focus. My frustration grew as I wasn't able to hit the ball straight. After a couple of minutes, he quickly corrected my swing and I started improving. Then, he declared, "You see, I'm still the same old man."

I drove back home, thinking about what he had said. He could still coach me better than anyone. I pondered over this. This man had been my mentor for years and suddenly his entire puzzle had shattered, or so I thought. Yet, his spirit had remained unchanged. His unwavering defiance in the face of trauma made me realize that perhaps not all of the changes that had welcomed me were negative. I couldn't let these differences bring me down; I didn't have many days at home and couldn't let them go to waste. I had to adapt.

For the remaining days before I went back to boarding school, I tried to appreciate all the new things that had welcomed me back. I realized how my friends and I still had the same connection and now had more stories to share. My bed regained my shape. I still loved my sister no matter what her hair looked like and that taco stand remained my favorite, no matter who the chef was. I was still part of the puzzle, my piece had just changed shape, and the puzzle had too. If I was going to fit in again, I had to remember the similarities between me and them, then and now. I had to recognize the changes in the puzzle and find my spot in it once again.

I learned to find comfort in the uncomfortable. I made new friends at boarding school each year even when my old friends were gone. I have adapted to different teachers and housemates every year. Constant change has pushed me to overcome the struggles of feeling out of place. Now I know that I am able to adapt to new scenarios by changing with them and finding my place within them. Things will inevitably undergo change and more challenges will arise, but I'll always remember that discomfort is good and that it should be seen as a guiding light towards paths of growth.

The shock was finally gone - I could breathe again.

Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Columbia, the University of Pennsylvania and 20 more!

by Jamie B.

The Surgeon

The apron drooped to my knees. I was emblazoned with the 'Hi, My Name is Jamie' sticker, coupled with a scarlet employee-in-training hat. The 'Fresh not Frozen, Grilled not Fried' motto resonated in my mind. It was July. I had taken the plunge and secured my very first part time job. I was flipping burgers, and I was excited.

I was accustomed to academia, to the sports field, to the stage, but this was an entirely fresh paradigm. Anuj, the staff trainer and joyously friendly employee tasked with the rather unfortunate challenge of having to teach me hamburgerological cuisine greeted me with a firm handshake. This guy meant business.

The familiar fast-food funk wafted through the tiny store like cologne in an airport duty-free store – overpowering, faintly nauseous and all-encompassing. The filing cabinets in my mind usually reserved for physics formulas, economics jargon and debating cases were tipped out and crammed with permutations and combinations of burgers – Otopo, Chicken Wrappa, Bondi. Exceptions to French conjugations were momentarily replaced with extra topping combos. The till became my new graphical calculator.

With surgeon-like precision Anuj modeled how to wrap a burger in four swift motions – place burger in the dead centre, pull wrap from left to right, then right to left, then roll the corners. He gestured towards his demonstration model and motioned for me to take to the stage. It was show time! Unfortunately, my burger ended up looking like the after-effects of Hurricane Katrina. Anuj patted me on the back, said 'you'll learn fast' – and smirked.

Suddenly the barricades were overrun and an influx of jandal-wearing, sun-glass toting beach-goers charged into the store. The orders came flying faster than budget cuts at a Tea Party convention. I heard the petrifying three words 'chicken tenderloin combo'. This was it, the Everest of my culinary career. It involved delving into the boss's prized stock of 'succulent tenderloins' as he had described, 'the highest quality meat we sell, expensive to buy and delicate to cook, we can't afford any mistakes'. I was handling meaty gold. As the first tenderloin slapped onto the grill with a satisfying sizzle, I could imagine the boss's scorching eyes scrutinizing my every action from behind the prying lens of the staff security camera. Sun-glass toter number two, the tenderloin culprit, then muttered 'Excuse me! Sorry mate, my fault, I meant the chicken nuggets.'

Silently, I screamed. I grimaced, pirouetted and pleaded with the security camera. Anuj saw my face, contorted in anguish, and took to the rescue with business-like efficiency. He rolled his eyeballs. In one graceful movement he scooped the tenderloins and flicked them into the cooler with one hand, and in perfect synchrony, removed the emergency chicken nuggets with the other. His eyes glistened with intensity. With consummate mastery his arms flicked from grill to cooker to table to wrap. In less than ninety seconds, the order was complete. The boss's eyeballs returned to their sockets. The day was saved. I worship the Anuj's of this world. Certain jobs may look simple but that simplicity masks years of expertise. My skills in the rococo art of burger flipping paled into insignificance beside the master. I learnt more than burger flipping that day. I learnt humility, respect and the value of a good chicken tenderloin.

Vanderbilt University

by Grace P.

A lot has changed about my back-to-school shopping since sixth grade, but the same item has always topped my to-buy list: my favorite planner, the Whitney English Day Designer.

I love the Day Designer because it includes a full page for every day, complete with an hourly schedule, to-do list, daily quote, and even a small box for gratitude. I write everything in my planner: homework assignments, after-school clubs, birthdays (even my own), and everything else that dares to be forgotten. If it's flying around in my head, it goes down on paper in smooth black ink. Every summer around mid-July, you can find me meticulously scheduling in important dates for the new school year. Planning for the future transforms feelings of anxiety and overwhelm into a sense of calm and preparedness.

However, all the time and careful attention I had taken to plan out my entire high school journey before freshman year became irrelevant when my mom shocked me with the news that we would be moving from our suburban home in St. Louis, Missouri to Blonay, Switzerland for her new job. How would I fit the enormous weight of moving across the world in a monthly calendar? How could my daily to-do list possibly have enough space to grapple with the knowledge that I would be packing up and leaving the only home I had ever known? The planning system I had relied on and trusted for years failed me, and I had no idea what to do. I never could have planned for this.

Between cardboard boxes, donation bags, and my ever-growing anxiety about moving to a new country, I got to thinking. There was an infinite list of experiences on the horizon I would never be able to plan for: starting a new school, making new friends, and assimilating into a new culture with a different language. This fear and discomfort led to the realization that my current planning system would not be able to keep up with the realities of my new life. I couldn't abandon the trusty Day Designer I relied so heavily upon, but I needed to adapt. How could I strike a balance between charting out life's most minute details and learning to be okay with changed plans?

I began searching for a solution, and eventually found it in the Target stationery aisle: colorful Post-It notes. Not only do they brighten my days by adding visual variety to each page, they make scheduling and planning more flexible. As I settled into my new home and school, it became evident that this system was exactly what I needed. Changes I would have previously viewed as inconvenient and frustrating morphed into exciting opportunities. Tutoring pushed back one hour on Saturday morning became a relocated Post-It note and time to go for a walk in the Swiss Alps. A doctor's appointment after school was no longer a wasted afternoon, but a chance to improve my French in the form of a neon orange colored Post-It note. Joining an international school and making new friends has not been a daunting task, but an extraordinary adventure.

I feel at ease knowing when (not if) plans change, all it takes is a quick adjustment in my planner and my mindset to stay focused on my goals while avoiding chaos. This addition to my planning routine has taught me it is not only necessary to be flexible and adapt to changes, but it's also the most efficient way to live.

As the handwritten Theodore Roosevelt quote on the front page of my planner reminds me, "There can be no life without change, and to be afraid of what is different or unfamiliar is to be afraid of life." Now, instead of the fear, confusion, and worry I felt when faced with an international move, I feel gratitude, hope, and excitement about the changes and challenges my future holds.

Duke University

by Alanna M.

Sam Gosling said in *Snoop* that your room is a reflection of the inside of your mind. Every chaotic piece of paper cluttering your living space represents an idea created inside that lump of grey matter. However, sometimes each of those neurons pile up and need to be organized. And so, as I walked past my Yamaha upright with sporadic piles of music and the dusty mounds of 1900s CDs, I realized: "I really need a shelf."

Just like any other creative with a penchant for mispronouncing Swedish, I went to IKEA and found a beautiful, white, open-backed cabinet that resonated with my desire for sophisticated simplicity.

The trouble started when the box arrived home. Late at night, I started hacking it open with a knife and scratched the unblemished white surface of my cabinet. A well-worn truism reverberated between my ears: Precision was key. "Lesson learned," I thought. "But no one cares about a single scratch." I tried to rationalize my mistake; my decision grated against my perfectionism, but at least the scratch reminded me to approach even menial tasks with care.

Then I embarked on the task, spurred by the tantalizing satisfaction of building it without instructions (I have a tendency to add unnecessary challenges to see just how far I can push myself). Ten minutes later, I was in the hall balancing the cabinet between the wall and my knee. The shelves were in, and now all I needed was the top, a humble piece of flat timber. And the struts that hold it together. And the plethora of screws littered around me; surely they were spares.

Just as I slotted the crowning piece onto my slightly lopsided shelf, the "Leaning Tower of Pisa" finally collapsed. The screws I had put in bent. I guess I would be needing those spares. The little wooden bits meant to keep the shelf stable snapped, and the middle panel had a hole ripped through its centre, as if Wolverine had ripped his claws up the side of my shelf.

At first, I felt anger at my ineptitude, then despair and denial. Every stage of grief towards the magnificent project I thought I had completed flashed through my brain. My frustration had peaked. The collapsed shelves had defeated me, but the niggling voice at the back of my mind, which guides all my movements, said: "Hey, you could have done this better. You have to try again." The next day, after a meditative break, I was back, more determined and clear minded than ever.

I embarked once again on the construction, without the instructions, but with the shelf lying horizontally on the floor. My determination to challenge myself had not yet swayed. By the end of the hour, I had a working shelf that didn't look like the diagram but was able to support books. I needed to try again. I started again with the instructions and built a working, sturdy shelf that looked as though it could be printed in the IKEA catalogue- so long as they photoshop out the extra scratches.

"Well, what's the moral? She used the instructions." Yes, I did use the instructions. Yes, I did have to remake the shelf three times. But every single mistake in those three attempts was a lesson I can use in the future. In every moment, I gained a greater understanding of the way parts fit together. Every time I looked at the instructions I realized I didn't need to carve my own path single-handedly; instead there was a lot of merit from building the work of those before me and taking their ideas to grow even more. And, at the very worst, at the end of it all, at least the chaotic pieces of paper were no longer on the floor.

University of Pennsylvania

by Anika P.

Sweet Child o' the 80's

To this day, when I hear a song from the 1980s, I am instantly transported to childhood happy car journeys, trying to sing in tune with my mother. Our soundtrack reflected my mother's conviction that an interest in music creates possibilities and positive connections. She and I have grown increasingly close by belting out tunes from 80's music, and these songs have become a symbol of her empowerment and the empowerment she passes on to me.

At first, I just enjoyed the music but didn't appreciate its significance. But, as I began to question my mother about the songs, we started to explore the late 20th-century histories of Britain and US Pop-culture icons I had known for years took on new meaning. Watching the conclusion of 'The Breakfast Club', which features the Simple Minds track, 'Don't You (Forget About Me)', I was struck by the depiction of young people trying to achieve authenticity through somewhat ludicrous means. This song is now inseparable from my realization that I need to follow my own path, even though it may be viewed by others as ridiculous or defiant.

Yet, as my mother led me through British musical history, she also opened up to me about her own. She helped me see the need to find balance between the demands of tradition and the norms of modern society through her own example. My mother was a second-generation immigrant growing up in London surrounded by the music of the 70's. But it was the 80's music of her teenage years that defined her. The music of artists like Boy George and David Bowie challenged her conventional upbringing and the ideals she had been raised with. My mother's parents encouraged her to pursue a career, which was progressive for their generation, but their traditional Indian values still restricted her freedom of choice. She was a keen young journalist but was pushed to pursue a career in pharmacy. Boyfriends were not allowed and she was expected to have an arranged marriage.

When she moved to university, musical icons like Madonna and Cyndi Lauper who embodied female empowerment helped her to grasp her newfound independence. Madonna's 'Papa don't Preach' had a massive impact on my mother because it celebrated the pregnancy of an unmarried woman. It was the antithesis of the rules she had been raised by. Yet, the music also reminded her of home, and listening to the radio with her own mother. Music was a rebellion, packaged in a familiar form. 80's artists helped her to recognize that she could seek a balance between cultural expectation and emerging possibilities for women, and begin to navigate away from her heritage on her own terms with 'Take On Me' by A-ha as her soundtrack. Even in a time of profound change, music was her constant.

My search for authenticity has been different, yet the need for change and balance is one that we share. While I do not want to be constrained by convention, I do not want to lose track of my background. Many around me have said that my choice to move away for college is a rejection of the easier options they have worked to lay before me. Some have even gone so far as to call it a rebellion. But taking inspiration from my mother and, of course, from my beloved 80s artists, I have come to the conclusion that becoming my own woman will require sound judgement, and respect for others, but also creativity, ambition and bravery. The music of the 80's gives me the courage to be bold, even if it makes others angry, and my mother's story has shown me how to retain the ideals that are important to me. Just as it did for my mother, music will push me forward while anchoring me to my past.

University of Pennsylvania

by Talia S.

My process of discovering who I am has been strongly influenced by two significant marches. First, I marched to the holiest Jewish prayer, the Shema, then to the beat of Asimbonanga Mandela. First, I marched along the brick paths of Auschwitz, then along the dirt roads of Soweto township. First, I marched with thousands of Jews, then with thousands of South Africans. First, I marched to remember, then I marched to belong - though I wasn't sure I ever would.

'Arbeit Macht Frei. Work makes you free.' As a young Jewish girl, I never thought I would walk beneath these infamous words while singing the Israeli national anthem - not only because I lived far away but because I did not think I was brave enough to face the true horrors of the Holocaust. At the age of 17, I travelled to Poland alongside 40 young Jews from South Africa. This trip was aimed to educate us about the horrors of our past, expose us to the uniqueness of the global Jewish community, and encourage us to examine the roots of prejudice, intolerance and hatred.

This march was not merely a journey in our ancestors' footsteps, but a process of self-discovery. My great uncle and great grandmother were survivors of Auschwitz. I never got to meet them; however, I felt as if I walked alongside them during the march. While being surrounded by young Jews from around the world, I realized how grateful I was to be Jewish and a part of this people. I learnt the power of hatred - that not only actions but also words can lead to a horror such as the Holocaust.

Returning to South Africa was challenging. I was met with the realization that South Africa could not offer me the connection and comfort of being close to my heritage. In Poland, I could feel connections to my past through seeing piles of shoes at Mejdanek or reading through The Book of Names in Auschwitz. But after this, I began to feel out of place in South Africa.

A year later, my school invited me to attend a Youth Day March commemorating the youths who were brutally murdered for taking action against the apartheid regime. I knew I would be out of my comfort zone, marching alongside people I had less of a connection with, whose past struggles had not been my own.

As we arrived at the starting point, I felt overwhelmed by the number of unfamiliar faces. When a student I didn't know asked me to march with her, I began to feel included. With every step I took, my discomfort began to ease, and I started to enjoy the march. We were singing songs of freedom. We saw people standing outside their homes, waving and smiling at us as we marched.

I realized that the Jewish nation's horrifying past was not so different from that of Black South Africans' under apartheid. I could identify with their feelings of fear, of not belonging and of hope for a better future. Our people had both been wrongly discriminated against. I held a sign that read, 'Calling for youth empowerment,' and for the first time I felt empowered as a South African. I had allowed my pessimistic attitude to blind me from the beauty of my home; we were of different races, religions, and histories, yet this no longer felt like a barrier. I finally felt part of the "rainbow nation."

Today I still march along my own path. I live with the comfort of knowing who I am and where I belong. I still have more to discover about myself, my Judaism and my South African identity; however, I now feel ready to continue my journey. I've found my comfort zone in South Africa, which means that it is time for me to step out, and find myself anew.

Duke, Tufts & Case Western University

by Timothy G.

Reaching The Summit

The gate creaked closed behind me as I stepped out onto the pavement. The sun was beginning to peek over the horizon, casting a gentle yellow light through the trees above me. I took a deep breath and stretched, the brisk morning air calming my growing excitement. The world felt silent and empty, and the only thing that mattered was me and the road ahead. I set off at an easy pace, savoring my surroundings with each stride. I didn't plan where I was going, but that's what made it exciting. The best way to explore was to get lost.

In fact, that attitude did not just apply to my running - it mirrored my approach to learning too. I have always loved to create things, and I began to see coding as the perfect outlet. Soaking up every resource I could find online and in the library, each of my projects became more ambitious than the last. I taught myself the skills I needed as I went, losing myself completely in the exciting world of technology.

The sun continued to rise and I was no longer under the cover of trees. I felt the harsh heat drain my energy. Looking ahead, I felt apprehensive – a long track winding up a steep hill that was notorious amongst runners. Aside from turning around, there was no other way home. I locked my gaze onto the road ahead and pushed forward.

At the same time, I was working on my latest project – a timetabling application for my school. I had experienced first-hand the painstaking process teachers had to endure to create lesson schedules manually, and identified the opportunity to solve a real-world problem. I dove into it head-first, losing myself in a world of graph theory, genetic algorithms and advanced databases, but soon my overzealous approach began to backfire. The program became bloated and disorganized; my lack of planning made further progress seem impossible.

Leaning over and gasping for air, I stopped under a solitary tree. I was barely halfway, but I felt exhausted. I didn't want to turn back now, but I was so tired I could hardly stand. At that moment, the idea of reaching the top felt impossible. Fitter runners had tried and failed to beat this hill, and despite my exhaustion, I could see that throwing myself at the problem wasn't going to work. I needed a plan to stack the odds in my favor.

I stood up, noting the incline of each part of the track; where to conserve energy and where to put in all my effort. I divided the route into smaller parts; each bend became a milestone and each step took me closer to the top. Before I knew it, I was looking down to where I started, feeling tired but flushed with success.

Once home, I deleted my first attempt and started from scratch. The way I managed to reach the top of that hill was to plan thoroughly, and this was what I needed to do for my project to succeed. Just like that run, it was challenging and I spent countless hours working on it. I solved the problem in sections, and the feeling of success that followed was completely worth it. I would never have thought that the inspiration I needed to solve my coding dilemma lay in running, but that lesson has stuck. Now, when I can't see the way forward, I step back, break down the problem, and tackle it piece by piece until I reach my goal. There's always a way to reach the summit, it's just a matter of finding it.

University of Southern California

by Qaqambile M.

During October 2011, my confidence changed for the better. I went from someone who felt that they had no value in the world, due to my irrational fear of being humiliated, to someone who believed in their worth to the world.

After class one day, my English teacher called me to stay behind and said “Qaks, I would like you to consider joining my public speaking club.” I was left shocked and confused. I was terrorized by thoughts like, “How could a shy, timid boy like myself join such a club?” However, I joined based on my teacher’s recommendation.

Despite my trepidation of failure, I spent the whole of 2012 honing my public speaking abilities. I admired my progress from the novice speaker shaking every time he spoke, to a speaker delivering with confidence. Impressed by my progress, my teacher invited me to partake in a competition against my fellow peers. She then thrust me on the spot when she told me that my first speech on stage would be an impromptu speech.

This terrified me. However, the audience laughed at my humor and I could see their interest in my speech. I placed second. This left me astonished. In that very moment, I realized that I have the ability to speak my mind without the fear of being ridiculed. I realized that I had the ability to converse on contentious topics like racism, sexism, politics, and religion. I had just grasped the notion that my words could impact lives, engage people in my ideas, and hopefully leave a mark on the world. It was in that moment that I realized the power of my voice.

It is only now that I view my teacher’s invitation to be one of the best opportunities that I have taken in my life, for which I am forever grateful. I realized that people are enticed by the content of my mind; the only thing that I had to do was simply speak. This newfound confidence in myself and my voice convinced me to pursue my other interests, such as learning the saxophone and playing sports like basketball and rugby. It led to my appointment as a leader within the school’s council and was ultimately the foundation of my leadership. It was through that experience that I was able to discover who I was, the boy who limited his potential, and who I could be, the man who could conceivably influence the world.

After numerous interactions with people who originate from impoverished areas, I identified that many have yet to discover their voices. It is a tragic reality that many people in rural areas are not confident in their abilities due to their circumstances. I yearn to change this unfortunate belief. My English teacher inspired me to see the potential in others, just as she had with me. It is thus my wish to assist people to discover their voices. This led me to numerous hours of helping to elevate those in communities around me out of poverty, especially with regards to their education and English proficiency. My ambition of becoming a social entrepreneur stems from my appetite for community outreach. Through my interactions, I believe that many people dream of becoming entrepreneurs, but lack the confidence to turn that dream into a reality. It is for this reason that I have the desire to go to college in order to put myself in the best position to acquire the necessary knowledge on start-up ventures so that I may assist others.

My English teacher gave me a sense of confidence that I had never felt before in myself, something I aspire to replicate in others. Just like how my English teacher plucked a reserved, anxious boy and gave him a new sense of life, I wish to do the same for others, so that they too can find their voices.

UCLA and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

by Matthew P.

"It's time for a serious chat," my dad said. "Your sister has been diagnosed with epilepsy."

I didn't know much about epilepsy at the time. Judging by the somber expression on my dad's face, though, I knew it was very, very serious. My brain, fried from a long day at school, automatically kicked into overdrive. I wondered what effect this had on my family.

The first time my sister had a seizure in front of me, I had no idea what was going on. It frightened me to see her have this out of body experience where she had no control over her actions; all I wanted to do was help. This helplessness made me realize the role I had to play and that I had to make it a priority for me to learn how to care for her when it would happen again. It has been difficult for me to see my parents struggle through this time, one could never wish upon an event such as this in anyone's life. They saw my sister's character entirely change as a result of this condition. She went from being a confident young girl that had an answer ready for any question before you could even ask it; to one that lacked assertiveness and social skills, what were once her defining characteristics. My heart broke for her and my parents.

What was best for Andie was a supportive, stable home life. It forced me to sometimes give up on visiting friends on the weekend, to be there for her when she needed it the most. As time progressed, I soon became a pillar of strength for my sister, whether it be during one of her seizures or in daily aspects of her life. From that day on, my relationship with my parents was never the same. I had transitioned into an adult with the responsibility and capability of taking care of and standing up for others. Our dinner conversations became more mature, and I loved our new dynamic. Having the responsibility of looking after my sister also gave me a greater sense of understanding and compassion for the unknown.

This experience as a whole enabled me to engage more with those around me. I felt as if I had a better understanding of people and their emotions. As a result, I forged deep and meaningful relationships with not only the people around me at school but also with people many years older than myself, many of whom I remain close with to this day. Engaging in meaningful conversations with these varied groups of people, including my parents, allowed me to mature at a young age.

I stopped relying on my parents to take care of everything in my life, soon thinking more for myself. I felt a strong, independent vision for who I wanted to be. I envisioned using my skills and talents to benefit those around me. Many people around me were still on the journey of self-discovery; finding and developing their own identity. I have discovered inner strength and confidence through my role as caregiver. This experience has shown me the importance of my contribution towards the welfare of others.

This is why the word - "family" - means a lot to me. My upbringing ended up so different than I expected. My parents simultaneously exposed me to both life's hardships and rewards by encouraging my sense of responsibility, overall maturity, and how much I value my relationships with others. Not forgetting the hurdles such as my sister's epilepsy which in turn allowed me to forge a stronger bond with my family. I will always remember that chat at the dining room table, for it shaped me and developed me into the responsible and robust character I am today.

Columbia University

by Canon C.

It is Friday evening and the stage is set with the "Glorified Podium of Discussion" in the middle of the living room.

First on the docket is "Weekly Fast Fact." At the sound of the gavel my grandfather declares, "If you are ever in need of a quick repair, there is only one item for every job: duct tape. Duct tape fixes everything!" Or so I was told.

Three pieces of particle board, half a roll of duct tape, and some TLC came together to create the "Glorified Podium of Discussion." Every Friday, for the past four years, my family has gathered to hold our personal family Congress TED Talk in the comfort of our home. It all began when we sat down to watch the primary election debates leading up to the 2016 presidential election and tensions began rising in the room.

Living in a multigenerational and multicultural household, I have been fortunate to be exposed to a full spectrum of views, opinions, and ideas that have bound my family together. Whether it be an evaluative look at United States foreign policy, a critique of a new movie-musical dance number, or a history lesson in space exploration, we have talked about it.

Of all the topics my family has discussed, there is one that has stuck with me: duct tape. The creative versatility of duct tape has transformed into the binding metaphor for family unity in my life. Every week I look forward to taping together the gap between clashing views, and this is only possible with communication. While there is a lack of meaningful dialog in society, my living room represents the reverse microcosm of encouraging, informative conversation.

Over the last seventeen years, I have had to become an expert in duct tape ingenuity - due to seven moves. I have had to give up roots in one city in exchange for a clean slate of unveiled opportunities and new relationships in the next.

Often, people are astonished when I name all the cities in which I have lived, but, in all honesty, the outcome of each move outweighs the frustrating process of packing up boxes, taping them shut, and hoping they arrive at the next destination. Moving from one city to another requires me to create new long-distance friendships, adapt to new school environments, and learn the "ins and outs" of an entire new community, while also giving me ample practice to reflect on my personal experiences. I carry with me an unyielding desire to adapt and understand the communities I call home by directly facing adversity.

After each move, the makeshift podium requires more duct tape to keep its integrity; in contrast, the past seven years have aided the growth of my emotional and psychological integrity on which I continued to build. My identity has also grown through my connection with my family in relation to the places we have lived. From taking part in a Mother's Against Drunk Driving forum, hosting an annual Dragon Boat Racing Festival, or attending NASA's lecture in the final days of the Pluto New Horizon Mission, I am able to tape together my experiences and lessons into a cohesive whole, bettering the person I wish to be.

(continued)

Columbia University (cont.)

by Cenon C.

My grandpa was wrong; duct tape cannot fix the entirety of the world's problems, yet I assert the discussions with my family have aided in a clearer understanding of who I am, one family TED Talk at a time.

Although my living room has changed many times, the importance of family unity has been developed by meaningful discussions. When it comes to facing adversity, I believe the "Glorified Podium of Discussion" has equipped me with skills for real world application. Obstacles will be the fuel of my ambition as I continue to strive for success with the skills developed in my living room.

USC, NYU, UC Berkeley & more.

by Shreya T.

From Disciple to Guru

"Lift that foot higher off the ground or you will keep falling out of your chakar!"

Namita's stern reminder rings sharply in my ear. It's around 5pm and I'm well into my sixth hour at my dance studio. It's been another long day where I leave feeling exhausted and sore but, every Sunday, it is my home.

During practices, everyone in the class is pushed beyond what seems possible. Talking, except to ask questions, is unacceptable. We forgo water and we run drills time after time until each step is mastered by every person in unison. Namita hurls strict corrections across the room as we move our way through eight count after eight count.

Yet, the minute rehearsal ends, the scene changes. Namita facilitates the conversation asking us about our school, our friends, our love lives, and our families. She nurses our wounds from both the physically demanding rehearsal, and the emotionally wounding drama in our personal lives. It is during these conversations that I have become incredibly close to the woman that is the heart and soul of our company, my teacher

Namita. Namita's roles as a strict disciplinarian and a loving caretaker are often split based on whether or not we are in the studio, and in my own teaching endeavors I have aimed to converge the two. Rather than separating results and empathy like Namita, I have become a coach and mentor that is "hard on performance and soft on people".

Modeling off my teacher's truly unique style, I've been able to find a happy medium between being empathetic and results-driven. As a coach for the Rocky Heights Middle School debate team, I expect engaged discussions, quick turnaround times for speeches, and enthusiastic acceptance of criticism after mock debates from my students because I want them to succeed at tournaments. Yet, I know to be understanding when my expectations aren't fully met because of excessive schoolwork, poor mental health, or other outside factors. Being only a couple years past my own middle school years, I know the rigor and often excessive stress that plagues students, not to mention the petty drama and pressure to fit in. I quickly found that being both a reliable source of information and an approachable one resulted in the most productive team. This meant knowing my audience.

Meetings are a mix of days where we all pull out our laptops and research for hours, but also of days where kids come to me exhausted from the school day, and we eat candy, laugh, and make slower progress. I practice the same style in mentoring biotech research students so that they are better prepared to conduct and present their research. Even in drilling students on how to use the autoclave, being able to be simultaneously understanding of their perspectives has allowed me to more effectively pinpoint where students are struggling.

(continued)

USC, NYU, UC Berkeley & more.

by Shreya T.

From days where I was demotivated by excessively strict dance rehearsals, I've learned the necessity of being able to read the room. I've begun to find methods to motivate my students in ways that are unique to me. In the advanced kids dance class I teach, I've attempted to draw attention and excitement by playing games like "freeze dance kathak", letting kids contribute to choreography, and even ending every class with our ceremonious team Tik Tok. My ladies class and I run drills on new steps until they have been mastered, and immediately follow it up with conversations regarding how to bring joy into our dancing and let ourselves be truly vulnerable in a safe space.

Through watching Namita interact in different situations, I have learned much more thanatkar and technique. Both discipline and empathy are incredibly important to me. By balancing both of Namita's personalities, I have become someone who is not only respected but has a relationship with the people I coach and mentor.

Georgia Institute of Technology

by Dennis Z.

As I was putting on my mask about to dive in, my instructor reminded me that I would be given a task to complete at 130 feet deep to test the effects of nitrogen narcosis — the potentially deadly alteration in a scuba diver's consciousness which affects their ability to make decisions, creates a false sense of security and brings unpredictable euphoria when diving deeper than 100 feet.

Just before I jumped into the water, I hesitated. What if something went wrong and I could not manage it? But then I remembered why I was doing this: it was not only to become a better diver, but more importantly to challenge myself. With that I jumped in.

Together with my instructor, I slowly began to descend along the guide line. As we neared the bottom of the line, I started to make out the coral reef which sat at around 80 feet. I started to recognize different fish from past dives, everything from vibrant blue fish to bright red lionfish.

As I swam towards the cliff that marked the beginning of uncharted territory, my mind was racing with thoughts of how narcosis could affect me. I was afraid that I would lose my focus and start acting dangerously, but through facing challenges in my life, I have devised a strategy that always levels my thinking: I took a deep breath and re-focused my mind and thought only of the task at hand.

As we passed the cliff, I could see the sandy floor waiting for us at 130 feet, yet it still seemed so far away. I was having a mental war with myself, wondering if I had been affected yet, if I should turn back to the familiar. Eventually, we were only a couple feet from reaching our goal depth and I started to feel excited, but the journey was far from over. As we neared the sea floor, I established my buoyancy and looked at my instructor who was preparing the narcosis test. Much to my surprise, it was an actual test. I took the slate from her, my eyes poured over the long division problem and I began to chuckle through my regulator.

Ordinarily, math is not a humorous subject for me, but the absurdity of the situation was enhanced by the euphoria I was apparently experiencing. With a tap on my shoulder from my instructor, I quickly shook off the effects, focused on the problem and used the waterproof pencil to reach the quotient.

After handing the slate back to my instructor, I looked up and I could barely see the surface - even though the visibility was very clear. It hit me how deep we were: as deep as a twelve story building. I was undeniably affected by narcosis, however I still had a clear head. I nervously watched my instructor as she checked my math. She finished and nodded with a smile. I felt a rush of relief, and finally began to truly notice my surroundings.

First, I recognized that I was slightly shivering and it was darker than usual. Then I noticed the stillness: there were fewer fish and the sea floor seemed untouched, everything seemed more calm. I wanted to stay in this other world for a little longer, but eventually the time came to return to reality.

As we ascended alongside the cliff wall of coral, I was in awe of the incredible beauty of the underwater world which amazed me every single dive. But, before I knew it, we were gazing over the reef again. When we finished our dive and broke the surface, I couldn't help but smile knowing what I had overcome. This feeling of accomplishment is what keeps me challenging myself every opportunity I can. While we swam to the boat, I immediately felt the urge to plan the next experience that would further challenge me.



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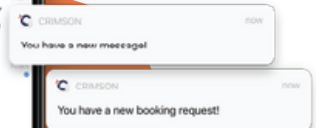
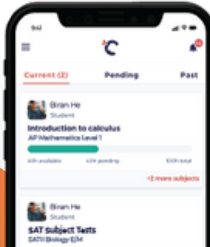
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