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Essays That Worked

What does the Admissions Committee look for in a successful essay? It's one of our most commonly asked questions.

Since the essay is an important part of the application process, the Admissions Committee has selected examples of essays that worked, written by members of the Johns Hopkins Class of 2016. These essays represent just a few examples of essays we found impressive and helpful during the past admissions cycle.

These "essays that worked" are distinct and unique to the individual writer; however, each of them assisted the admissions reader in learning more about the student beyond the transcripts and activity sheets. We hope these essays inspire you as you prepare to compose your own personal statements. The most important thing to remember is to be original and creative as you share your own story with us.

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Nina Y.

Hometown: Dallas, Texas
Intended major: Biology

A Home Destroyed

I was seven years old when I saw the ocean for the first time. My grandmother had invited me to visit her near Okinawa, Japan. I will never forget that encounter—the intense sun, the endless horizon, the infinite shades of blue that dissolved any boundary between sky and waves. And most of all, the secret of the water. Swimming in those waters was like diving into a kaleidoscope, deceptively plain on the outside, but a show of colors on the inside, waiting to dazzle me, mesmerize me. Those colors! Coral reefs—pink, green, red, purple—covered the seafloor; streaks of sunlight illuminated them, the swaying water creating a dance of hues. And weaving in and out of the contours of coral swam brilliant fish that synchronized every movement with the water, creating one body, one living entity. I longed to join and flow with them to the music of the waves; that's where I felt I belonged. And leaving was like parting home, not going home.

Five years later, I returned. At first, all seemed to match my memory: the crystalline waters and that open horizon with the sun daring to come closer to Earth. But the second I dove in, I knew my home had vanished...white. That's all I could see around me: bone-white death. I couldn't accept it. I kept swimming farther out, hoping to catch even the smallest hint of color. But there was no sign of that brilliant garden I remembered, just fragments of bleached coral. It was like looking down onto the aftermath of a war: a bombed city, with only the crumbles of cement to testify for the great buildings that once stood. But who was the culprit behind this egregious attack?

Though at the age of twelve, I couldn't even begin to guess, I now know the answer is us. Humans are an impressive species: we have traveled to every continent, adapted to countless environments, and innovated to create comfortable means of living. But in the process, we have stolen the colors from nature all around the globe, just as we did that coral reef. Our trail of white has penetrated the forests, the oceans, the grasslands, and spread like a wild disease. I, too, have left a white footprint, so I have a responsibility to right these wrongs, to repaint those colors, and to preserve the ones that remain. Some question why I should care. The answer is simple: this planet is my home, my birthplace. And that, in and of itself, is an inseparable bond and a timeless connection. Nature has allowed me my life, so I have no right to deny its life. As Jane Goodall once said, "If we kill off the wild, then we are killing a part of our souls." This is my soul—our soul. I know that I alone cannot protect this soul, so I will not make a promise that I cannot fulfill. But this promise I will make: I will do what I can do.

Admissions Reader Comments

Reading the essay, I get the sense that Nina is both intellectually curious and committed to scientific and environmental research. Though Nina's essay is well written, what makes it so strong is that it also conveys a personal connection to larger environmental issues. Too often, students write about issues—political, educational, environmental, etc.—in an impersonal and argumentative way. The college essay isn't a thesis; it's meant to be a reflection of who the student is, and Nina's love of the ocean, of travel, and of the environment gives me a glimpse of who she is as an individual.

—*Dana Messinger, Senior Assistant Director of Admissions*

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John D.

Hometown: Villanova, Pennsylvania

Intended majors: History and Biology

Dharamsala

I sat nervously in the plastic chair, my cotton chupa tied a bit too tightly. A few robed monks sat quietly by a water cooler. After a short wait, a guide led my group through the palace gardens into the Karmapa's office. The room was 1970s inspired: paneled oak walls, Venetian blinds, and a plaid couch atop an Oriental rug. Seemingly out of place, the Karmapa sat gloomily, dressed in a traditional vermilion robe.

My fixation with India began with a paperback copy of *Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God*. The book depicted India as a blend of modernism and tradition; a country illustrated in Vedic literature as utopian and mystic, yet today a fusion of Hinduism and urban development. My love of India stems from its multifaceted personalities, its ability to function as a center of religious fervor, a backdrop for historical events of great import, and a cosmopolitan nation of both metropolises and pastoral communities. I envisioned glass cities laced with smog, burlap bags of spices, crumbling shrines coughing undulating incense rather than the monochromatic lifestyle of the Main Line. Readily submitting to India's allure, I signed up for a service trip to explore the cultures of India by teaching English in a small village. Travel, especially for service, propels me to journey beyond suburbia and to explore the world, whether it is as a student ambassador in China or an English teacher in Tanzania. However, an itinerary mix-up landed me in the foothills of the Himalayas, far from the India I had read about.

The community was Dharamsala, a Buddhist enclave home to the exiled Tibetan government. With little knowledge regarding Buddhism, I was initially dismayed with the hushed village. I vowed to learn, though. I attended Buddhist lectures at the headquarters of the Tibetan government, received a Tibetan name, Tenzin Thegchog, from the Dalai Lama, and taught English to refugees. Then came the audience with the Karmapa Lama, Tibetan Buddhism's leader. The naturally reserved Tibetans would vivaciously discuss with me his future as Tibet's leader and enthuse about his looks; the Tibetans agreed that the Karmapa was attractive. However, sitting on the office floor, I felt little inspiration. Then the Karmapa allowed us to ask questions. Spontaneously, I asked, "Have you ever loved someone?"

The Karmapa answered immediately: "No, I never had the chance."

Where service is, for me, intrinsically personal, it isolates the Karmapa. Required to lead his people, the Karmapa is unable to establish the personal relationships that make service enjoyable and define "normal" life. Whether it is pouring tea at a soup kitchen, creating Valentine's Day cards with children at the Domestic Abuse Center, or planting oak tree saplings with the Willistown Conservation Trust, I find pleasure in serving others and also in the relationships formed while doing so. I realized the Karmapa's answer was truthful and inspiring. Through his blunt response, I was able to comprehend both my passion for community service, my independence, and understand what makes the Karmapa so attractive.

Admissions Reader Comments

John's essay conveyed a lot about his personality and made me want to see him on our campus. At first, I was drawn to John's sense of adventure and imagination. I liked that reading this book led John to volunteer in a small Indian village. What was more impressive, however, was his ability to "roll with the punches" and see the change in location as an opportunity to learn and explore a different part of India. Asking the Karmapa whether he's ever loved someone took a lot of courage, but it also suggested John has an interest in some of the world's great philosophical and moral questions. I liked that Karmapa's response made John reflect on his own interests and commitment to service. This essay made me think John would be very involved on our campus—in community service, in other clubs and organizations, as a roommate, and in the classroom.

—*Dana Messinger, Senior Assistant Director of Admissions*

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Natalie M.**Hometown:** Grosse Pointe, Michigan**Intended major:** Biology**Don't Be Sorry**

It was a raw, blustery March day and I was leading four classmates to my house to hash out the remaining details of our current English presentation. When I opened the door, however, I received a surprise. I had not anticipated my mother still being home and neither had my group members. Their faces turned slightly blank, as if they were trying to hide their confusion and surprise. The previously relaxed atmosphere had become very formal and quiet. I had seen this before.

My group members had only observed my mom for a few seconds, but it was long enough to ignite their curiosity. I casually explained that the woman in the wheelchair they had just seen was my mother and that she has M.S.—multiple sclerosis. This is a fact I have relayed dozens of times throughout my life, and I thought nothing of it as I took my group member's heavy winter jackets and hung them up.

But one of the girls immediately said, "Oh, I'm sorry."

I was actually speechless. Sorry? Sorry for what? No one has ever said those words to me before regarding my mother, and I did not know how to respond. You say "I'm sorry" when someone's uncle passes away or when their pet dies; only "bad" situations are deserving of the "I'm sorry" response and I have never viewed my mother's disease as needing to receive it.

I shrugged off the reply in a polite way, and we got working. But the moment my group members left I was alone with my thoughts, alone with the "I'm sorry" clause.

Our family's life is completely different than others due to my mom's disease, but I have known no other way of living. My mother has had M.S. since she was in college, so I was born into a world with motorized scooters and walkers and extra precautions. This is my norm. And while other people may pity my mother and our family, I see no reason to be down. I could spend all my time harping on the drawbacks and my "missed opportunities," but what fun would that be? I will always find the silver lining.

This seemingly insignificant March day actually made quite a difference for me. I finally realized that you need to appreciate not just what you have had, but what you have not. Because of my mother I had learned independence and responsibility while most kids were still watching Saturday morning cartoons. I could balance a checkbook by fifth grade, thought more consciously about keeping our house clean than most kids ever will, and was always willing to lend a hand. These lessons have stuck with me. I understand that you have to make the best out of what you are given; take what life gives you and run with it.

So why be sorry for me? I know I would not trade my life for the world.

Admissions Reader Comments

Natalie's voice in this essay is real and deeply thoughtful. Her life with her mom is just that, her life with her mom. She underscores her appreciation for what she has had as well as what she has not had and relates to this as a "silver lining" opportunity. A chance to learn independence, responsibility, sensitivity, and compassion is all balanced with making the best of what life provides you with. One of my favorite sentences is, "Take what life gives you and run with it." This entire essay provides me with a clear view of Natalie's personal qualities, her balance in life, her ability to adapt and live positively and her full appreciation for enjoying the bright side and accepting what one cannot change. This essay was a window into the unique life experiences and personal values that Natalie will add to our freshman class.

—*Sherryl Fletcher, Senior Associate Director of Admissions*

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Alan C.**Hometown:** San Leandro, California**Intended major:** Biomedical Engineering**Cooking Up a Cataclysm**

Goggles? Check.

Lab coat? Yep.

Common sense? Maybe not.

I was determined to start the mission anyway, a mission of proving independence, a mission of showing I did not need to be babied and demonstrating just some modicum of autonomy. My mission: to cook salmon.

I turned around, checked that my grandmother was asleep, and gave myself the go-ahead.

I turned on the stove, tossing pink chunks into the pan; the hot oil first sizzled, shook, then violently splattered with incredible vehemence.

I turned into a statue, frozen in shock.

I had neglected to wipe the wet fish before chucking it into the pan. Now I stood in pain, in panic, in my outlandish garb, wincing as each speck of oil found its home on my exposed skin. Then out of nowhere my grandmother appeared, my gray-haired savior with a lid, throwing her frail body before the pan to shield mine. The oil indignantly pattered against the lid as she set it down; I bowed my head in guilty silence, waiting to be scolded.

But Po-Po just took my hands.

"Are you hurt?" she asked in her rural Chinese dialect, gently.

I looked up from the dirtied kitchen floor, my mother's sacred domain desecrated. There was no anger on Po-Po's tired face, only love, and splotches of reddened skin where the oil had scalded her. She wore no protective goggles, no fancy coat. I had been afraid she might be angry at first, but I was more shaken now, shamed by the realization that I had hurt her.

Yet, she never showed it. She never does. She did, however, accept my apologies and even worked beside me to help clean. Only when I appeared not to notice did she briefly disappear to check her burns.

I had acted rashly that day, but so had she, in confronting the volcano of hot grease. Only, her act of irrationality had been for my sake. I believe it to be the same irrationality that compelled her to leave her rustic home among rice paddies to immigrate to America, where she would work two menial jobs, where the people spoke a strange language ever beyond her grasp. She stood alone, enduring those hardships for the sake of her children and grandchildren. I stood alone for my own sake, to further some illusion of independence.

In reality, though I was reluctant to admit it before, I have always depended on people like her. I depend on them for the sweet, life-giving encouragement and the warm, unconditional love that makes everything else possible. They love me. They inspire me. They free me from fear of failure.

Indeed, despite all she has done for me, Po-Po never asks for anything more in return than just for us to spend time together. She is simple. But so is love. Here is someone without so much as a high school education. Yet, it is through her that I have learned things no amount of schooling could possibly teach—a giving heart, strength of character, a humble spirit, and most importantly, an understanding that I am connected to those who have made my opportunities possible.

As I see my grandmother's quiet resolution, I feel invigorated, inspired. This titan of quiet strength makes me feel invincible. Her selflessness humbles me. Her love and loving sacrifices are pillars of my success. I just needed a little prodding from a malicious piece of fish to remind me that even as I stand triumphantly over my neat little heap of achievements, people like my grandmother stand with me, and it is on their sacrifices that I build my success.

Admissions Reader Comments

All too often, I see essays that start with a first sentence of "My _____ inspires me." While I appreciate the statement, there are definitely more creative ways to convey the message. Alan does just this. He has written, in my opinion, a successful essay. Through his story telling, he informs us of why he is who he is and how the people in his life have influenced where he wants to be in the future. By the end of the essay, I was thinking to myself, "This student would be a great roommate...witty, warm, caring, and thankful to those who have sacrificed for him!"

—Shannon Miller, Senior Assistant Director of Admissions

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Alex M.

Hometown: Yorba Linda, California

Intended major: Computer Science

Thinking Outside the Box

"I wish the Boy Scouts of America made computers an Eagle Scout required merit badge," was my response to the Troop Commissioner when he asked if I wanted to make any changes to the Boy Scout program. This was the final question of my Eagle Board of Review, signifying the culmination of my eleven-year commitment to scouting.

Traditionally, Boy Scouts is about camping, starting fires, and surviving in the outdoors. But, in my case, it was also about applying technology. At the beginning of high school, my troop had dwindled in size, to a point that many scouts were looking for other troops to join in the event ours disbanded. Part of the problem, I thought, was that my troop did not have a website; without this, we were unable to attract new scouts looking to join the troop and publicize all the activities in which we were involved. In a few days time, I set up a domain, created pages for photographs, announcements, calendars, and a form for new scouts to request to speak with our Scoutmaster. Over the next several months, recruitment soared and our membership nearly doubled. I served as Webmaster for the next three years, during which time I enhanced the features of our website. One significant improvement, appreciated by leaders, was easy mobile access for updating calendars and documents like committee meeting agendas. While this drive to create an online presence for my troop was created by my love of computers, I was not finished integrating technology into my Boy Scout experience.

For most scouts, the Eagle project is an experience that usually involves building benches or putting together boxes. I'm not much good with a hammer, and my nature is more thinking "outside the box" than building a box. Instead of the sound of tapping hammers and saws cutting wood, the noises from my project came from the clicking of mice and tapping on keyboards. My idea was to create a Touchscreen Health Information Kiosk for the St. Jude Neighborhood Free Clinic that serves the underprivileged in my community. I had to plan, develop and lead my project. Completion took an extensive amount of time fundraising and interacting with counselors, volunteers, medical staff, and the IT department. The majority of the work involved extensive programming for a touchscreen PC that would be placed inside a kiosk. I found that even though programming was almost second nature to me, some of the volunteers struggled with it. Many times, I was tempted to do the work myself, but taking the time to teach younger scouts how to program in HTML was rewarding in and of itself. The clinic's patients are now able to access bilingual information, watch videos about many common diseases, learn more about the medications they have been prescribed, and find specific dietary recommendations.

My Eagle Scout project allowed me to make a difference in my community in a way that truly represented who I am, a young man who loves technology. I was able to make the whole scouting experience my own, implementing what I love to help those around me.

Admissions Reader Comments

As I am sure you can imagine, after looking at thousands of applications, you will see many students who participate in similar activities. Boy Scouts is definitely one of those activities. Therefore, when we tell people to choose a topic that will make them memorable in the pool, you might not think that writing about being a Boy Scout would be a good choice. However, Alex proves that you can make it work. His story is a unique one in that he has brought his passion for technology into an activity that normally focuses on the outdoors. I appreciate how he shows an openness to change, his ability to think outside the box, and his desire to give back to his community. This essay is the perfect blend of showcasing an extracurricular activity and also wrapping in an interest in computer science, his potential major.

—*Shannon Miller, Senior Assistant Director of Admissions*

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