



Sample College Admissions Essays

We have prepared this handout of actual essays written by current Harvard students who attended secondary schools in the UK (with names changed for anonymity) in order to provide some guidance to schools and applicants. Because the university admissions processes in the US and the UK are markedly different, we have received requests for some sample essays and tips for writing them and hope they will be helpful.

Here is the official description of the personal essay requirement:

Please write an essay (250 words minimum) on a topic of your choice or on one of the options listed below. This personal essay helps us become acquainted with you as a person and student, apart from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data. It will also demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself.

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
4. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
5. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.
6. Topic of your choice.

Your essay for a US university *might* be the same one you would write for the UCAS system, but perhaps not. We are interested in your academic successes and future plans, but also want to understand what makes you tick as a person. What are your hopes, dreams and fears?

Our advice is to think of two or three possible topics, write a quick first draft of each essay and then show them to your best friend, mother, teacher or anyone who knows you well. Ask that person if your voice and personality come through in the essays and which one sounds the most like *you*. Then take that essay and polish it off!

As you will see from the following sample essays, these students have written about learning to ride a bike, culture shock at coming to the UK, music, public service, and a favourite book. What will you write about?

Sample College Essay #1

I never imagined that by swimming, a Vision Center in India would be built. And I certainly never thought so many people could be cured of blindness there.

For the past twelve years of my life, my passion has been competitive swimming. Mile after mile I train almost every single day in the hope of becoming that much faster, that much more powerful in the water, that much closer to my goals. (My classmates tell me I am better adapted to live in the water than on land!) I have reached more athletic goals than I ever imagined when I first splashed into the water as a timid six-year old. I have won several Texas state titles, been ranked nationally in both the US and the UK, set numerous International Schools Tournament records, and captained both my school and club swim teams.

This past year, I decided to combine my love of swimming with a fundraising target. My older brother worked as an intern on the Flying Eye Hospital run by the international sight-saving charity ORBIS. I was horrified by his description of the magnitude of curable, but untreated eye diseases. I knew I had to take action. To help those who have or will lose their sight for no fault of their own, my triplet siblings and I organized, planned, publicized, and successfully led a community-wide Swim-a-thon that raised funds for ORBIS. The goal of our event was not only to raise funds for this very worthwhile cause, but more importantly, to raise awareness about avoidable blindness. Our theme "Every minute a child goes blind", caught the attention of the community. The word spread. People were surprised to know that we have the medical capability to cure millions of people with a simple surgery or eye droplets, yet hundreds of people lose their sight every day.

As a two-year class vice president and student member of the Athletic Advisory Board, I was able to gain permission from the Head of School to plan the event. I convinced the Athletic Director to set aside pool time and recruited life guards. In order to garner support, I placed ads in the school newspaper, hung posters throughout my school, and persuaded my coach to replace an afternoon workout with the Swim-a-thon. After weeks of preparation, swim mates, school faculty, and parents logged thousands of laps.

It was an immensely successful day. Enough money was collected to build a Vision Center in India, with surgical equipment, medicines, and training materials. The new Vision Center will not only treat thousands of patients, but will create a permanent site to train doctors and other medical personnel. As Treasurer of my school's chapter of the National Honor Society, I plan to allocate charity funds this year to ORBIS for the continuing operational costs of the Vision Center.

Every minute a child goes blind. Thirty-seven million people in the world are blind. Remarkably, an overwhelming 28 million of them do not need to be. When I think about the Vision Center we funded, I am overwhelmed with a sense of accomplishment and pride. Even though I will never meet the many people who will receive medical treatment there, the satisfaction of knowing that I have helped change the lives of thousands of people is astonishing. More meaningful than any swim race or trophy, we have brought hope where there was darkness.

Sample College Essay #2

If we speak the same language, then why don't I understand you? Why are the clothes you wear so different and the expressions you say so unclear to me?

It was my first day in England and a "Bank Holiday" at that. With only one sport on television, I was determined to watch and study a game I had no idea how to play. I didn't know what an "over" was, or even the job of the bowler. I didn't know what a "wicket" was, or how many a team needed to win. But I didn't care. I was living across the pond now, and if I was going to fit into my new surroundings, understanding the rules of cricket seemed like a fine starting point.

I persevered, and eventually I was explaining the now familiar game of cricket to my family; baseball analogies helped a great deal. I was proud of myself. I had conquered the English culture. Maybe England wasn't so bad after all.

I soon realized how naive these thoughts were. Cricket was just the beginning. A whole world of different traditions and customs was thrown in front of me. July Fourth was exchanged for Guy Fawkes Day and the "the celebration with the turkey" was erased from the calendar. Where would I fit in? Rugby and Premier League Football dominated the sports channels. Where was my beloved ESPN? Why is the television show, Little Britain, so hysterical? The movie theatres were smaller than a British mini cooper, and the Super Bowl kicked off at four a.m. The warmth of the Texan sun was replaced by the rainy days of Wimbledon.

I was surprised to see that some parts of life abroad were better. Friends became mates. The frenetic pace of Piccadilly Circus and the splendour of St. Paul's Cathedral are unsurpassed. Roundabouts make the traffic run smoothly. I like the sound of "Cheers".

Over sixty different nationalities and over thirty languages are represented at the International School I attend. The culture shock was overwhelming. But I refused to yield. I was going to start by mixing into the English culture. I reported on local and national events as an Editor of the school newspaper. In addition I met swimmers from all over the U.K. through my British swim team, all with different backgrounds and lifestyles from mine.

The cultures that engulfed me when I first came to England are part of me now. London is at my disposal. The people, the pubs, the expressions, and the entertainment are all a part of what makes living in England a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Yes, I have missed several Thanksgiving feasts and numerous Astros games, but I have come to understand and enjoy a completely new place.

I wouldn't change any of my experiences. Living in Europe has broadened my perspective on life and opened my eyes to so many wonderful people and ideas. People have similar goals wherever they come from. I'm glad I know that there is no single right way to achieve them.

Sample College Essay #3

I wake up and there is a rhythm in my head: it's hazy. I climb into the shower and the water tapping on my scalp reminds me. As I sit on the bus to go to school, I get strange looks from passengers as I tap the rhythm onto my knees, but it's not yet fully formed. Throughout the school day, I feel it evolve and develop until I inevitably sit down at my drums and play. From my brain via my heart it enters my muscles; they transfer it to the sticks which relay it to the drum. Eventually, the air gets my gift and the rhythm returns through my ears. Even after the sounds are gone, the rhythm is not. Until I go to bed, a day's repetition keeps it rebounding inside my cranium, in my own private concert hall. This is the journey of my daily rhythm.

I wake up and there is a rhythm in my head: it's not straight for this rhythm swings. At 6:00 am in Germany I get on a coach and as the wheels rotate beneath me I get closer. My coach has thirty five other people in it, each one is carried forward in their own sense of time, but in less than an hour they must all merge; seven hundred people will not accept a big band not keeping the pulse. Butterflies are roused in my gut and nerves take over. I've never played a solo in front of so many people yet somehow my fear must be quelled. My imagination, my sticks and my drum-set have to communicate my inner rhythm; the audience must be able to feel it or else I have failed. Rhythm is the barrier to embarrassment. As the opening to "Sing, Sing, Sing" begins to take shape, all my trust is placed in the pattern I have within me transporting me safely to the end. If this vessel sank, I too would go with it. A standing ovation confirmed that this time, the barrier held strong.

I wake up and there is a rhythm in my head: but it is quiet. In fact, no-one hears it; it makes no noise and never will. Between the hours of 0845 and 1545 I have 4 beats: each one signaling another unit of learning. This phrase is repeated 5 days a week for 40 weeks a year and the chorus goes on 6 more times. My song is my school, and in it I am caught up in its inner rhythms that I cannot control – I must give in to them. The melodies that are assigned to these rhythms are made up of Virgil, esters and numbers that don't exist. From these, cadences form that give me a chordal progression through education. Each part of my song has been given a name; there are no verses, no choruses but consecutive Key Stages. The rhythm indicates when I should make the transition: there is a series of fills, but they are not called fills. They call them exams and as the stages progress, the fills get more intense. In fact, they get more frequent and at the end of my school career, I look forward to a year where exams punctuate my calendar. In January, I will have moved to the dominant, only to complete the progression in June when I descend and finish on the tonic: a perfect cadence.

I wake up and there is rhythm: the rhythm is life. The cycle of night and day and the constant pulsing in my chest are rhythms, and as the Earth revolves around our local star it is in time with the universe. I think in meter: a man crosses the street and his steps divide the distance between one curb and the next – they provide a beat in the asphalt bar, or at least that is how I picture it. If animals could not use the rhythm of the seasons, then they would surely die. Life is a rhythm and all that it contains is in time. When the rhythm ceases to exist, so will I.

Sample College Essay #4

Magicians are not truly magical, though they like others to think they are. So what inspires this “deception”? Some think it is the money and others, the glamour of performing on stage and mystifying the audience. But for me it has always been a question of identity. Magic has helped me develop my confidence and communication skills so when the time comes to stand up and address a crowd, such as the school debate or a Model United Nations conference, it is no effort at all.

However, I can say that one unusual circumstance in my life has given me a new sense of direction for my magic. At first, I thought magic was mere entertainment, but Horace, a man from the local Spastics Center diagnosed with autism in his late twenties, changed my perspective on my art. So often when we think of the disabled, we imagine children, and we sympathize with them. With Horace, I was faced with a situation largely unknown to the general public’s experience: an unemotional adult who rarely spoke to or acknowledged others around him.

When I tried to engage him, he mumbled to me uninterested and somewhat detached. But then when I produced my deck of cards, when through several routines and then showed him how he, too, could create “miracles”, he smiled and laughed. This reaction highlighted the most rewarding aspect of magic because he accepted me into his world and responded to me. The Center’s staff even commented, “We have never seen Horace behaving in such an emotional way!”

For the first time, Horace had been given hope that he too could, perhaps, achieve and live a meaningful life. The magic had broken a myth of futility and dispelled it forever. I saw that magic could provide a driving force for pursuing change, and this realization overwhelmed me. I had witnessed something so unusual that the force of it took my breath away.

The essence of magic is establishing a connection between the audience and the performer. With Horace, the ordinary had become the extraordinary, and for a moment, we connected in a state called “Astonishment”. This experience brings about a revisit to our most basic form, unaltered by culture or society. Indeed, that instant is so special because as adults, we are all too rarely astonished, and this moment returns us to our days as children when we were clueless and laughed at everything.

This unusual encounter showed me that in this moment of astonishment, magic has the power to inspire. Since the encounter with Horace I have founded a society that brings all the magicians at my school together to perform magic for the elderly and the less fortunate in the nearby community. If I can show them, for instance, how to produce one-pound coins from thin air, then contrary to what they have been told, perhaps they can challenge their “limits”. Then, dare I say that my passion for magic would be enhanced by a touch of true magic, generated perhaps from a truly unusual moment of astonishment.

Sample College Essay #5

The ball ricocheted off the wall and disappeared into the black hole under my bed. It had been some years since the Hoover had been granted visiting rights and a heavy cloud of fluff covered every inch of the 4' x 6'3" rectangle. Slightly nervous of what I might find, I ventured in slowly with an outstretched hand. The ball was nowhere to be found but I felt a small box-shaped object. I dragged it out, dusted it off and there looking somewhat the worse for wear, was my old leather book trunk.

As I eased open the lid, the familiar smell (slightly musty with time) transported me immediately back ten years. Inside, in pride of place on top, staring boldly back at me, was my old friend Winnie the Pooh. The familiar, faded yellow face, the shrunken red t-shirt with tummy protruding proudly from beneath, an empty honey pot and by his side, as ever, was Piglet.

It is to Winnie the Pooh that I owe my greatest debt. It was this funny bear of little brain and large appetite who first sparked my interest in the literary world. He taught me about friendships and Woozles and how to make the best Heffalump traps. Many a happy hour was spent with Pooh and his friends facing adversity with his ever optimistic demeanour.

Although I haven't seen this treasured copy for many a year, I must admit to a weekly dose of life in a Hundred Acre Wood. Each week I share my passion for reading with Class 2A at the local village primary school. We start off with one of Pooh's adventures – richly embellished with different voices that perhaps A.A. Milne may not have intended but, nevertheless, seem to get the seal of approval from my six-year-old audiences.

After this we get down to the nitty gritty – the business of learning to read – or as I like to call it “Discovering How to Lose Yourself”. I go round the class taking turns to listen to them read. Although the range of their abilities is surprisingly large they all make a huge effort and really enjoy themselves. Progress is made and more and more pupils get lost each week.

All too soon it is time to go. I say my goodbyes and rush back to school for my next lesson. I hum a little happiness tune and as I round the corner into the school a large thundercloud looms above. In my head a very Pooh-like voice says “Tut, tut, looks like rain!”.

Sample College Essay #6

Nothing of much significance ever happens on the Isle of Wight. And to those of you for whom island travels only involved the palm trees and pink sand variety, let me enlighten you. The Isle of Wight is a small, chalky lump that broke off the south coast of England and came to a halt one mile out. It is caught in a rather charming time warp – circa. 1955. No palm tree could ever survive the freezing easterly winds that blast through from Siberia every winter and the only pink sand would be the result of a small child falling over a sandcastle on the way back from the Mr. Whippy ice cream van. It has sand and it has trees but of the altogether more hardy type. The sand is yellow and coarse, the trees are sturdy and solid with waxy leaves to withstand the salty air. The people are sturdy and solid too with an accent inherited from their pirate ancestors that sets them apart from those on the mainland. Life ambles along and nobody rushes. Pity anyone caught in a queue at the butchers behind Mrs. Singleton as she recounts, far too vividly, details of her latest health scare.

Don't get me wrong, it has its virtues – the Victorian pier pointing like a lace gloved finger out to sea and the promenade with shops selling pink and white sticks of rock with "Isle of Wight" running through it (how do they do that?), "Kiss me Quick" sunhats and inflatable boats. And on the corner of the High Street, the Cod Father fish and chip shop with a sign in the window saying "We batter anything!"

It was on this sleepy little island that I, as a small boy, spent most of my summers. Summers that, due to the temperature, would be called autumn anywhere else – but nothing a long wetsuit and hat couldn't disguise.

One day in early July, arriving back from another bracing trip to the beach, I saw my mother and sister sitting side by side on the grassy bank overlooking the lawn. Next to them was a large bag of sweets and a bicycle. My mother announced that today was the day she was going to teach me how to ride a bike. There had been many attempts before but today I could tell she meant business.

A succession of sweets was laid out at regular intervals along the lawn marking the route I was to take. Each time I made it to that point without falling off I got the sweet. Knowing that I really didn't have any choice, I climbed awkwardly onto the enormous bike. Mother steadied me with one hand and then with a shove I was hurtling down the bank and onto the lawn. A blur of screaming and clapping preceded the first of many spectacular falls and my shins took on the blue hue of an uncooked lobster with blobs of grease from the chain splattered amongst the bumps. My sister, younger than me and already a whiz on her pink Barbie bike, gave patronizing advice trying to sound encouraging but, I suspect, rather enjoying the moment.

An hour and a half later, battered and bruised with tears streaking through the mud on my face, I climbed onto the beast one more time. I steadied myself, focused on the hedge at the other end of the lawn (where the biggest chocolate bar lay) and with an almighty push I launched myself forward peddling with fury. Before I knew what had happened, there was a rush of green as I landed headfirst into the hedge. The bike, free of its incompetent rider, did an elegant ark to the left before coming to a halt.

As I cycle confidently (but still can't do the no hands thing) to the boathouse every day, I think of the words of Claude Pepper who said, "Life is like riding a bicycle. You don't fall off unless you plan to stop peddling." I won't stop peddling. – and am proud to announce that on the 3rd July 1998 something of great significance did, at last, happen on the Isle of Wight.