Sample Essay #1

Accepted by Princeton

Hiking to Understanding

Surrounded by thousands of stars, complete silence, and spectacular mountains, I stood atop New Hampshire's Presidential Range awestruck by nature's beauty. Immediately, I realized that I must dedicate my life to understanding the causes of the universe's beauty. In addition, the hike taught me several valuable lessons that will allow me to increase my understanding through scientific research.

Although the first few miles of the hike up Mt. Madison did not offer fantastic views, the vistas became spectacular once I climbed above tree line. Immediately, I sensed that understanding the natural world parallels climbing a mountain. To reach my goal of total comprehension of natural phenomena, I realized that I must begin with knowledge that may be uninteresting by itself. However, this knowledge will form the foundation of an accurate view of the universe. Much like every step while hiking leads the hiker nearer the mountain peak, all knowledge leads the scientist nearer total understanding.

Above tree line, the barrenness and silence of the hike taught me that individuals must have their own direction. All hikers know that they must carry complete maps to reach their destinations; they do not allow others to hold their maps for them. Similarly, surrounded only by mountaintops, sky, and silence, I recognized the need to remain individually focused on my life's goal of understanding the physical universe.

At the summit, the view of the surrounding mountain range is spectacular. The panorama offers a view of hills and smaller mountains. Some people during their lives climb many small hills. However, to have the most accurate view of the world, I must be dedicated to climbing the biggest mountains I can find. Too often people simply hike across a flat valley without ascending because they content themselves with the scenery. The mountain showed me that I cannot content myself with the scenery. When night fell upon the summit, I stared at the slowly appearing stars until they completely filled the night sky. Despite the windy conditions and below freezing temperatures, I could not tear myself away from the awe-inspiring beauty of the cosmos. Similarly, despite the frustration and difficulties inherent in scientific study, I cannot retreat from my goal of universal understanding.

When observing Saturn's rising, the Milky Way Cloud, and the Perseid meteor shower, I simultaneously felt a great sense of insignificance and purpose. Obviously, earthly concerns are insignificant to the rest of the universe. However, I experienced the overriding need to understand the origins and causes of these phenomena. The hike also strengthened my resolve to climb the mountain of knowledge while still taking time to gaze at the wondrous scenery. Only then can the beauty of the universe and the study of science be purposefully united. Attaining this union is my lifelong goal.
Sample Essay #2

Accepted by Cornell

Question: Tell us about an opinion you had to defend. How has this affected your belief system?

I chuckle to myself every time I think about this. I am perceived as a mild-mannered, intelligent individual until I mention that I am involved in riflery. It is interesting to watch someone's expression change. It is as if I instantaneously grew a pair of horns and a sharp set of claws. Believe me this gets worst; I am a member of the NRA. I try to tell these folks that I belong to the NRA to fire my rifle. "Oh my God! You fire real guns? with real bullets?!!" they remark with a perplexed look on their face. Besides having horns and claws, I now possess a tail and leathery wings.

This is how it began five years ago. I had played on a soccer team for several years. As I grew older I began having difficulty playing soccer because of shortness of breath. I was diagnosed as having mild asthma which ended my soccer career and eliminated my participation in most physical sports.

Shortly afterward, during a Boy Scout summer camp, I participated in riflery at their shooting range. This was the first time I had ever touched a firearm. To my amazement, I won the camp's first place award for marksmanship. I was more than eager when a friend of mine asked me if I would like to join a shooting club.

My parents were wary when I asked to join the rifle club. My mother feared guns, but my father felt there was no problem with trying this sport. Gratefully, he gave me the opportunity to try rifle marksmanship, despite secretly hoping that I would quit. Both of my parents were afraid of what people would think about their son's involvement with guns.

Like my parents a majority of people believe that all firearms are dangerous to our society. All they remember are the hysterical news releases of street violence and injured children. I am often asked how many deer I've shot. Frankly, I could never bring myself to injure another living creature and neither would most of the competitors I have met. Yet, I keep finding myself defending the sport from all of the misconceptions that surround it. Most people have developed a negative impression of the sport and I have found that these prejudices are difficult, if not impossible, to rectify.

Because of this conflict, I have become an open minded individual. I express my opinions without reservation, and I have learned to accept opinions and viewpoints contrary to my own. I do not intend to alter what I enjoy because of the ignorance of friends and acquaintances. If people have a negative view of me simply because of the sport I am active in, then they must be so superficial that they cannot see the person who I really am. I am no longer apprehensive of being perceived as a gun toting, trigger happy fanatic, even though I still endeavor to educate my friends and relatives on the beauty of this sport.

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Sample Essay #3

Accepted by Wellesley

It took me eighteen years to realize what an extraordinary influence my mother has been on my life. She’s the kind of person who has thoughtful discussions about which artist she would most want to have her portrait painted by (Sargent), the kind of mother who always has time for her four children, and the kind of community leader who has a seat on the board of every major project to assist Washington’s impoverished citizens. Growing up with such a strong role model, I developed many of her enthusiasms. I not only came to love the excitement of learning simply for the sake of knowing something new, but I also came to understand the idea of giving back to the community in exchange for a new sense of life, love, and spirit.

My mother’s enthusiasm for learning is most apparent in travel. I was nine years old when my family visited Greece. Every night for three weeks before the trip, my older brother Peter and I sat with my mother on her bed reading Greek myths and taking notes on the Greek Gods. Despite the fact that we were traveling with fourteen-month-old twins, we managed to be at each ruin when the site opened at sunrise. I vividly remember standing in an empty amphitheater pretending to be an ancient tragedian, picking out my favorite sculpture in the Acropolis museum, and inserting our family into modified tales of the battle at Troy. Eight years and half a dozen passport stamps later I have come to value what I have learned on these journeys about global history, politics and culture, as well as my family and myself.

While I treasure the various worlds my mother has opened to me abroad, my life has been equally transformed by what she has shown me just two miles from my house. As a ten year old, I often accompanied my mother to (name deleted), a local soup kitchen and children’s center. While she attended meetings, I helped with the Summer Program by chasing children around the building and performing magic tricks. Having finally perfected the “floating paintbrush” trick, I began work as a full time volunteer with the five and six year old children last June. It is here that I met Jane Doe, an exceptionally strong girl with a vigor that is contagious. At the end of the summer, I decided to continue my work at (name deleted) as Jane’s tutor. Although the position is often difficult, the personal rewards are beyond articulation. In the seven years since I first walked through the doors of (name deleted), I have learned not only the idea of giving to others, but also of deriving from them a sense of spirit.

Everything that my mother has ever done has been overshadowed by the thought behind it. While the raw experiences I have had at home and abroad have been spectacular, I have learned to truly value them by watching my mother. She has enriched my life with her passion for learning, and changed it with her devotion to humanity. In her endless love of everything and everyone she is touched by, I have seen a hope and life that is truly exceptional. Next year, I will find a new home miles away. However, my mother will always be by my side.

ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE COMMENTS:
The topic of this essay is the writer’s mother. However, the writer definitely focuses on herself, which makes this essay so strong. She manages to impress the reader with her travel experience, volunteer and community experience, and commitment to learning without ever sounding boastful or full of herself. The essay is also very well organized.
Sample Essay #4

Accepted by Harvard

Of all the characters that I've "met" through books and movies, two stand out as people that I most want to emulate. They are Attacus Finch from To Kill A Mockingbird and Dr. Archibald "Moonlight" Graham from Field of Dreams. They appeal to me because they embody what I strive to be. They are influential people in small towns who have a direct positive effect on those around them. I, too, plan to live in a small town after graduating from college, and that positive effect is something I must give in order to be satisfied with my life.

Both Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham are strong supporting characters in wonderful stories. They symbolize good, honesty, and wisdom. When the story of my town is written I want to symbolize those things. The base has been formed for me to live a productive, helpful life. As an Eagle Scout, I represent those things that Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham represent. In the child/adolescent world I am Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham, but soon I'll be entering the adult world, a world in which I'm not yet prepared to lead.

I'm quite sure that as teenagers Attacus Finch and Moonlight Graham often wondered what they could do to help others. They probably emulated someone who they had seen live a successful life. They saw someone like my grandfather, 40-year president of our hometown bank, enjoy a lifetime of leading, sharing, and giving. I have seen him spend his Christmas Eves taking gifts of food and joy to indigent families. Often when his bank could not justify a loan to someone in need, my grandfather made the loan from his own pocket. He is a real-life Moonlight Graham, a man who has shown me that characters like Dr. Graham and Mr. Finch do much much more than elicit tears and smiles from readers and movie watchers. Through him and others in my family I feel I have acquired the values and the burning desire to benefit others that will form the foundation for a great life. I also feel that that foundation is not enough. I do not yet have the sophistication, knowledge, and wisdom necessary to succeed as I want to in the adult world. I feel that Harvard, above all others, can guide me toward the life of greatness that will make me the Attacus Finch of my town.

ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE COMMENTS:
This essay is a great example of how to answer this question well. This applicant chose characters who demonstrated specific traits that reflect on his own personality. We believe that he is sincere about his choices because his reasons are personal (being from a small town, and so forth). He managed to tell us a good deal about himself, his values, and his goals while maintaining a strong focus throughout.
Sample Essay #5

Accepted by Stanford

When I look at this picture of myself, I realize how much I've grown and changed, not only physically, but also mentally as a person in the last couple of years. Less than one month after this photograph was taken, I arrived at the [school's name] in [school's location] without any idea of what to expect. I entered my second year of high school as an innocent thirteen year-old who was about a thousand miles from home and was a new member of not the sophomore, but "lower-middle" class. Around me in this picture are the things which were most important in my life at the time: studying different types of cars and planes, following Michael Jordan's latest move, and seeing the latest blockbuster show like "Phantom of the Opera" or "Jurassic Park". On my t-shirt is the rest of my life -- tennis. Midway through my senior year at the special [school's name] school, the focuses in my life have changed dramatically.

If there is one common occurrence which takes place for every single person in the diverse student body at [school's name], it is that we all grow up much faster for having lived there. I do not know whether this speeding up of the maturing process is generally good or bad, but I definitely have benefited.

The classroom has become a whole different realm for me. Before, the teachers and students alike preached the importance of learning, but it was implicitly obvious that the most important concern was grades. At [school's name] teachers genuinely believe that learning is the most important objective and deeply encourage us to collaborate with each other and make use of all resources that we may find. In fact, in a certain class this year, my teacher assigned us to prepare every day of the week to discuss a certain book; there were only two requirements in this preparation -- we had to maximize our sources, glean from everything and everyone in the school, but we were not allowed to actually look at the book. As a result, I know more about that book than any other that I have actually read. It is teaching methods such as this which ensure that we will learn more. Indeed, this matter of "thinking" has been one of the most important aspects of my experience. Whether in Physics or English, I'm required to approach every problem and idea independently and creatively rather than just regurgitate the teacher's words. In discussion with fellow students both inside and outside of class, the complex thoughts flowing through everyone's brain is evident.

However, I believe that the most important concepts that I have espoused in being independent of my parents for half of each year, deal with being a cosmopolitan person. The school's faculty and students are conscious about keeping all of the kids' attention from being based on the school. Every single issue of global concern is brought forth by one group or another whether it be a faculty member, publication, ethnic society, or individual student. Along with being aware of issues of importance, after attending [school's name] my personality has evolved. First, my mannersisms have grown: the school stresses giving respect to everyone and everything. Our former headmaster often said, "Character can be measured not by one's interaction with people who are better off than him or herself, but by one's interactions with those who are worse off."

The other prime goal of the school's community is to convert every single timid lower-classman into a loud, rambunctous senior. Basically, if you have an opinion about something, it is wrong not to voice that opinion. Of course, being obnoxious is not the idea. The key is to become a master of communication with teachers, fellow students, all of who are a part of the community, and most importantly, those who are outside of the community.

I do not want to make [school's name] sound as if it produces the perfect students, because it doesn't. But the school deserves a lot of credit for its efforts. Often, some part of the mold does remain. As the college experience approaches, I am still the same person, only modified to better