

# College Essay Examples That Worked

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Personal Statement Examples

- The "Burying Grandma" Example College Essay Example
- The "Punk Rock Philosopher" College Essay Example
- The "Grandma's Kimchi" College Essay Example
- The "Travel and Language" College Essay Example
- The "Dead Bird" Example College Essay Example
- The "I Shot My Brother" College Essay Example
- The "Porcelain God" College Essay Example
- The "Five Families" College Essay Example

### UC Essay Examples

- The "Yearbook" Example UC Essay

### Supplemental Essay Examples

#### UChicago Supplemental Essay Examples

- The "Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road" UChicago Supplemental Essay Example

- The "Rock, Paper, Scissors" UChicago Supplemental Essay Example

#### U of Michigan Supplemental Essay Example

- The "East Meets West" U of Michigan Supplemental Essay Example

## PERSONAL STATEMENT EXAMPLES

### THE "BURYING GRANDMA" EXAMPLE COLLEGE ESSAY EXAMPLE

*Written for the Common App "Tell us your story" prompt.*

They covered the precious mahogany coffin with a brown amalgam of rocks, decomposed organisms, and weeds. It was my turn to take the shovel, but I felt too ashamed to dutifully send her off when I had not properly said goodbye. I refused to throw dirt on her. I refused to let go of my grandmother, to accept a death I had not seen coming, to believe that an illness could not only interrupt, but steal a beloved life.

When my parents finally revealed to me that my grandmother had been battling liver cancer, I was twelve and I was angry--mostly with myself. They had wanted to protect me--only six years old at the time--from the complex and morose concept of death. However, when the end inevitably arrived, I wasn't trying to comprehend what dying was; I was trying to understand how I had been able to abandon my sick grandmother in favor of playing with friends and watching TV. Hurt that my parents had deceived me and resentful of my own oblivion, I committed myself to preventing such blindness from resurfacing.

I became desperately devoted to my education because I saw knowledge as the key to freeing myself from the chains of ignorance. While learning about cancer in school I promised myself that I would memorize every fact and absorb every detail in textbooks and online medical journals. And as I began to consider my future, I realized that what I learned in school would allow me to silence that which had silenced my grandmother. However, I was focused not with learning itself, but with good grades and high test scores. I started to believe that academic perfection would be the only way to redeem myself in her eyes--to make up for what I had not done as a granddaughter.

However, a simple walk on a hiking trail behind my house made me open my own eyes to the truth. Over the years, everything--even honoring my grandmother--had become second to school and grades. As my shoes humbly tapped against the Earth, the towering trees blackened by the forest fire a few years ago, the faintly colorful pebbles embedded in the sidewalk, and the wispy white clouds hanging in the sky reminded me of my small though nonetheless significant part in a larger whole that is humankind and this Earth. Before I could resolve my guilt, I had to

broaden my perspective of the world as well as my responsibilities to my fellow humans.

Volunteering at a cancer treatment center has helped me discover my path. When I see patients trapped in not only the hospital but also a moment in time by their diseases, I talk to them. For six hours a day, three times a week, Ivana is surrounded by IV stands, empty walls, and busy nurses that quietly yet constantly remind her of her breast cancer. Her face is pale and tired, yet kind--not unlike my grandmother's. I need only to smile and say hello to see her brighten up as life returns to her face. Upon our first meeting, she opened up about her two sons, her hometown, and her knitting group--no mention of her disease. Without even standing up, the three of us—Ivana, me, and my grandmother--had taken a walk together.

Cancer, as powerful and invincible as it may seem, is a mere fraction of a person's life. It's easy to forget when one's mind and body are so weak and vulnerable. I want to be there as an oncologist to remind them to take a walk once in a while, to remember that there's so much more to life than a disease. While I physically treat their cancer, I want to lend patients emotional support and mental strength to escape the interruption and continue living. Through my work, I can accept the shovel without burying my grandmother's memory.

### **THE "PUNK ROCK PHILOSOPHER" COLLEGE ESSAY EXAMPLE**

*This was written for the Common App, and works for multiple prompts (or none of them, because the author is that cool):*

I am on Oxford Academy's Speech and Debate Team, in both the Parliamentary Debate division and the Lincoln-Douglass debate division. I write screenplays, short stories, and opinionated blogs and am a regular contributor to my school literary magazine, The Gluestick. I have accumulated over 300 community service hours that includes work at homeless shelters, libraries, and special education youth camps. I have been evaluated by the College Board and have placed within the top percentile.

But I am not any of these things. I am not a test score, nor a debater, nor a writer. I am an anti-nihilist punk rock philosopher. And I became so when I realized three things:

1) That the world is ruled by underwear. There is a variety of underwear for a variety of people. You have your ironed briefs for your businessmen, your soft cottons for

the average, and hemp-based underwear for your environmental romantics. But underwear do not only tell us about who we are, they also influence our daily interactions in ways most of us don't even understand. For example, I have a specific pair of underwear that is holey, worn out but surprisingly comfortable. And despite how trivial underwear might be, when I am wearing my favorite pair, I feel as if I am on top of the world. In any case, these articles of clothing affect our being and are the unsung heroes of comfort.

2) When I realized I cannot understand the world. I recently debated at the Orange County Speech League Tournament, within the Parliamentary Division. This specific branch of debate is an hour long, and consists of two parties debating either side of a current political issue. In one particular debate, I was assigned the topic: "Should Nation States eliminate nuclear arms?" It so happened that I was on the negative side and it was my job to convince the judges that countries should continue manufacturing nuclear weapons. During the debate, something strange happened: I realized that we are a special breed of species, that so much effort and resources are invested to ensure mutual destruction. And I felt that this debate in a small college classroom had elucidated something much more profound about the scale of human existence. In any case, I won 1st place at the tournament, but as the crowd cheered when my name was called to stand before an audience of hundreds of other debaters, and I flashed a victorious smile at the cameras, I couldn't help but imagine that somewhere at that moment a nuclear bomb was being manufactured, adding to an ever-growing stockpile of doom. And that's when I realized that the world was something I will never understand.

3) When I realized I was a punk rocker philosopher. One summer night, my friend took me to an underground hardcore punk rock show. It was inside a small abandoned church. After the show, I met and became a part of this small community. Many were lost and on a constant soul-search, and to my surprise, many, like myself, did not have a blue Mohawk or a nose piercing. Many were just ordinary people discussing Nietzsche, string theory, and governmental ideologies. Many were also artists creating promotional posters and inventive slogans for stickers. They were all people my age who could not afford to be part of a record label and did something extraordinary by playing in these abandoned churches, making their own CDs and making thousands of promotional buttons by hand. I realized then that punk rock is not about music nor is it a guy with a blue Mohawk screaming protests. Punk rock is an attitude, a mindset, and very much a culture. It is an antagonist to the conventional. It means making the best with what you have to

contribute to a community. This was when I realized that I was a punk rock philosopher.

The world I come from consists of underwear, nuclear bombs, and punk rockers. And I love this world. My world is inherently complex, mysterious, and anti-nihilist. I am David Phan, somebody who spends his weekends debating in a three piece suit, other days immersed within the punk rock culture, and some days writing opinionated blogs about underwear.

But why college? I want a higher education. I want more than just the textbook fed classrooms in high school. A community which prizes revolutionary ideals, a sharing of multi-dynamical perspectives, an environment that ultimately acts as a medium for movement, similar to the punk rock community. I do not see college as a mere stepping stone for a stable career or a prosperous life, but as a supplement for knowledge and self-empowerment; it is a social engine that will jettison us to our next paradigm shift.

### **THE "GRANDMA'S KIMCHI" COLLEGE ESSAY EXAMPLE**

Every Saturday morning, I'd awaken to the smell of crushed garlic and piquant pepper. I would stumble into the kitchen to find my grandma squatting over a large silver bowl, mixing fat lips of fresh cabbages with garlic, salt, and red pepper. That was how the delectable Korean dish, kimchi, was born every weekend at my home.

My grandma's specialty always dominated the dinner table as kimchi filled every plate. And like my grandma who had always been living with us, it seemed as though the luscious smell of garlic would never leave our home. But even the prided recipe was defenseless against the ravages of Alzheimer's that inflicted my grandma's mind.

Dementia slowly fed on her memories until she became as blank as a brand-new notebook. The ritualistic rigor of Saturday mornings came to a pause, and during dinner, the artificial taste of vacuum-packaged factory kimchi only emphasized the absence of the family tradition. I would look at her and ask, "Grandma, what's my name?" But she would stare back at me with a clueless expression. Within a year of diagnosis, she lived with us like a total stranger.

One day, my mom brought home fresh cabbages and red pepper sauce. She brought out the old silver bowl and poured out the cabbages, smothering them with garlic and salt and pepper. The familiar tangy smell tingled my nose. Gingerly, my

grandma stood up from the couch in the living room, and as if lured by the smell, sat by the silver bowl and dug her hands into the spiced cabbages. As her bony hands shredded the green lips, a look of determination grew on her face. Though her withered hands no longer displayed the swiftness and precision they once did, her face showed the aged rigor of a professional. For the first time in years, the smell of garlic filled the air and the rattling of the silver bowl resonated throughout the house.

That night, we ate kimchi. It wasn't perfect; the cabbages were clumsily cut and the garlic was a little too strong. But kimchi had never tasted better. I still remember my grandma putting a piece in my mouth and saying, "Here, Dong Jin. Try it, my boy."

Seeing grandma again this summer, that moment of clarity seemed ephemeral. Her disheveled hair and expressionless face told of the aggressive development of her illness.

But holding her hands, looking into her eyes, I could still smell that garlic. The moments of Saturday mornings remain ingrained in my mind. Grandma was an artist who painted the cabbages with strokes of red pepper. Like the sweet taste of kimchi, I hope to capture those memories in my keystrokes as I type away these words.

A piece of writing is more than just a piece of writing. It evokes. It inspires. It captures what time takes away.

My grandma used to say: "Tigers leave furs when they die, humans leave their names." Her legacy was the smell of garlic that lingered around my house. Mine will be these words.

## **THE "TRAVEL AND LANGUAGE" COLLEGE ESSAY EXAMPLE**

*Written for the Common App "tell us your story" prompt.*

When I was very little, I caught the travel bug. It started after my grandparents first brought me to their home in France and I have now been to twenty-nine different countries. Each has given me a unique learning experience.

At five, I marveled at the Eiffel Tower in the City of Lights. When I was eight, I stood in the heart of Piazza San Marco feeding hordes of pigeons, then glided down Venetian waterways on sleek gondolas. At thirteen, I saw the ancient, megalithic

structure of Stonehenge and walked along the Great Wall of China, amazed that the thousand-year-old stones were still in place.

It was through exploring cultures around the world that I first became interested in language.

It began with French, which taught me the importance of pronunciation. I remember once asking a store owner in Paris where Rue des Pyramides was. But when I pronounced it PYR-a-mides instead of pyr-A-mides, with more accent on the A, she looked at me bewildered.

In the eighth grade, I became fascinated with Spanish and aware of its similarities with English through cognates. Baseball in Spanish, for example, is *béisbol*, which looks different but sounds nearly the same. This was incredible to me as it made speech and comprehension more fluid, and even today I find that cognates come to the rescue when I forget how to say something in Spanish.

Then, in high school, I developed an enthusiasm for Chinese. As I studied Chinese at my school, I marveled how if just one stroke was missing from a character, the meaning is lost. I loved how long words were formed by combining simpler characters, so *Hu ō* (火) meaning fire and *Shān* (山) meaning mountain can be joined to create *Hu ō shān* (火山), which means volcano. I love spending hours at a time practicing the characters and I can feel the beauty and rhythm as I form them.

Interestingly, after studying foreign languages, I was further intrigued by my native tongue. Through my love of books and fascination with developing a sesquipedalian lexicon (learning big words), I began to expand my English vocabulary. Studying the definitions prompted me to inquire about their origins, and suddenly I wanted to know all about etymology, the history of words. My freshman year I took a world history class and my love for history grew exponentially. To me, history is like a great novel, and it is especially fascinating because it took place in my own world.

But the best dimension that language brought to my life is interpersonal connection. When I speak with people in their native language, I find I can connect with them on a more intimate level. I've connected with people in the most unlikely places, finding a Bulgarian painter to use my few Bulgarian words with in the streets of Paris, striking up a conversation in Spanish with an Indian woman who used to work at the Argentinian embassy in Mumbai, and surprising a library worker by asking her a question in her native Mandarin.

I want to study foreign language and linguistics in college because, in short, it is something that I know I will use and develop for the rest of my life. I will never stop traveling, so attaining fluency in foreign languages will only benefit me. In the future, I hope to use these skills as the foundation of my work, whether it is in international business, foreign diplomacy, or translation.

I think of my journey as best expressed through a Chinese proverb that my teacher taught me, "I am like a chicken eating at a mountain of rice." Each grain is another word for me to learn as I strive to satisfy my unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

Today, I still have the travel bug, and now, it seems, I am addicted to language too.

- - -

[Click [here](#) for this student's amazing Instagram photos.]

### **THE "DEAD BIRD" EXAMPLE COLLEGE ESSAY EXAMPLE**

*This was written for a Common App prompt that no longer exists, which read: Evaluate a significant experience, risk, achievement, ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.*

Smearred blood, shredded feathers. Clearly, the bird was dead. But wait, the slight fluctuation of its chest, the slow blinking of its shiny black eyes. No, it was alive.

I had been typing an English essay when I heard my cat's loud meows and the flutter of wings. I had turned slightly at the noise and had found the barely breathing bird in front of me.

The shock came first. Mind racing, heart beating faster, blood draining from my face. I instinctively reached out my hand to hold it, like a long-lost keepsake from my youth. But then I remembered that birds had life, flesh, blood.

Death. Dare I say it out loud? Here, in my own home?

Within seconds, my reflexes kicked in. Get over the shock. Gloves, napkins, towels. Band-aid? How does one heal a bird? I rummaged through the house, keeping a wary eye on my cat. Donning yellow rubber gloves, I tentatively picked up

the bird. Never mind the cat's hissing and protesting scratches, you need to save the bird. You need to ease its pain.

But my mind was blank. I stroked the bird with a paper towel to clear away the blood, see the wound. The wings were crumpled, the feet mangled. A large gash extended close to its jugular rendering its breathing shallow, unsteady. The rising and falling of its small breast slowed. Was the bird dying? No, please, not yet.

Why was this feeling so familiar, so tangible?

Oh. Yes. The long drive, the green hills, the white church, the funeral. The Chinese mass, the resounding amens, the flower arrangements. Me, crying silently, huddled in the corner. The Hsieh family huddled around the casket. Apologies. So many apologies. Finally, the body lowered to rest. The body. Kari Hsieh. Still familiar, still tangible.

Hugging Mrs. Hsieh, I was a ghost, a statue. My brain and my body competed. Emotion wrestled with fact. Kari Hsieh, aged 17, my friend of four years, had died in the Chatsworth Metrolink Crash on Sep. 12, 2008. Kari was dead, I thought. Dead.

But I could still save the bird.

My frantic actions heightened my senses, mobilized my spirit. Cupping the bird, I ran outside, hoping the cool air outdoors would suture every wound, cause the bird to miraculously fly away. Yet there lay the bird in my hands, still gasping, still dying. Bird, human, human, bird. What was the difference? Both were the same. Mortal.

But couldn't I do something? Hold the bird longer, de-claw the cat? I wanted to go to my bedroom, confine myself to tears, replay my memories, never come out.

The bird's warmth faded away. Its heartbeat slowed along with its breath. For a long time, I stared thoughtlessly at it, so still in my hands.

Slowly, I dug a small hole in the black earth. As it disappeared under handfuls of dirt, my own heart grew stronger, my own breath more steady.

The wind, the sky, the dampness of the soil on my hands whispered to me, "The bird is dead. Kari has passed. But you are alive." My breath, my heartbeat, my sweat sighed back, "I am alive. I am alive. I am alive."

### **THE "I SHOT MY BROTHER" COLLEGE ESSAY EXAMPLE**

From page 54 of the maroon notebook sitting on my mahogany desk:

"Then Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me." - Genesis 4:13

Here is a secret that no one in my family knows: I shot my brother when I was six. Luckily, it was a BB gun. But to this day, my older brother Jonathan does not know who shot him. And I have finally promised myself to confess this eleven year old secret to him after I write this essay.

The truth is, I was always jealous of my brother. Our grandparents, with whom we lived as children in Daegu, a rural city in South Korea, showered my brother with endless accolades: he was bright, athletic, and charismatic.

"Why can't you be more like Jon?" my grandmother used to nag, pointing at me with a carrot stick. To me, Jon was just cocky. He would scoff at me when he would beat me in basketball, and when he brought home his painting of Bambi with the teacher's sticker "Awesome!" on top, he would make several copies of it and showcase them on the refrigerator door. But I retreated to my desk where a pile of "Please draw this again and bring it to me tomorrow" papers lay, desperate for immediate treatment. Later, I even refused to attend the same elementary school and wouldn't even eat meals with him.

Deep down I knew I had to get the chip off my shoulder. But I didn't know how.

That is, until March 11th, 2001.

That day around six o'clock, juvenile combatants appeared in Kyung Mountain for their weekly battle, with cheeks smeared in mud and empty BB guns in their hands. The Korean War game was simple: to kill your opponent you had to shout "pow!" before he did. Once we situated ourselves, our captain blew the pinkie whistle and the war began. My friend Min-young and I hid behind a willow tree, eagerly awaiting our orders.

Beside us, our comrades were dying, each falling to the ground crying in "agony," their hands clasping their "wounds." Suddenly a wish for heroism surged within me: I grabbed Min-young's arms and rushed towards the enemies' headquarters, disobeying our orders to remain sentry duty. To tip the tide of the war, I had to kill their captain. We infiltrated the enemy lines, narrowly dodging each attack. We then cleared the pillars of asparagus ferns until the Captain's lair came into view. I quickly pulled my clueless friend back into the bush.

Hearing us, the alarmed captain turned around: It was my brother.

He saw Min-young's right arm sticking out from the bush and hurled a "grenade," (a rock), bruising his arm.

"That's not fair!" I roared in the loudest and most unrecognizable voice I could manage.

Startled, the Captain and his generals abandoned their post. Vengeance replaced my wish for heroism and I took off after the fleeing perpetrator. Streams of sweat ran down my face and I pursued him for several minutes until suddenly I was arrested by a small, yellow sign that read in Korean: DO NOT TRESPASS: Boar Traps Ahead. (Two summers ago, my five year old cousin, who insisted on joining the ranks, had wandered off-course during the battle; we found him at the bottom of a 20 ft deep pit with a deep gash in his forehead and shirt soaked in blood) "Hey, stop!" I shouted, heart pounding. "STOP!" My mind froze. My eyes just gazed at the fleeing object; what should I do?

I looked on as my shivering hand reached for the canister of BBs. The next second, I heard two shots followed by a cry. I opened my eyes just enough to see two village men carrying my brother away from the warning sign. I turned around, hurled my BB gun into the nearby Kyung Creek and ran home as fast as I could.

\* \* \*

Days passed. My brother and I did not talk about the incident.

'Maybe he knew it was me,' I thought in fear as I tried to eavesdrop on his conversation with grandpa one day. When the door suddenly opened, I blurted, "Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing," he said pushing past me, "Just a rough sleep."

But in the next few weeks, something was happening inside me.

All the jealousy and anger I'd once felt had been replaced by a new feeling: guilt.

That night when my brother was gone I went to a local store and bought a piece of chocolate taffy, his favorite. I returned home and placed it on my brother's bed with a note attached: "Love, Grandma."

Several days later, I secretly went into his room and folded his unkempt pajamas.

Then, other things began to change. We began sharing clothes (something we had never done), started watching Pokémon episodes together, and then, on his ninth birthday, I did something with Jon that I hadn't done in six years: I ate dinner with him. I even ate fishcakes, which he loved but I hated. And I didn't complain.

Today, my brother is one of my closest friends. Every week I accompany him to Carlson Hospital where he receives treatment for his obsessive compulsive disorder and schizophrenia. While in the waiting room, we play a noisy game of Zenga, comment on the Lakers' performance or listen to the radio on the registrar's desk.

Then, the door to the doctor's office opens.

"Jonathan Lee, please come in."

I tap his shoulder and whisper, "Rock it, bro."

After he leaves, I take out my notebook and begin writing where I left off.

Beside me, the receptionist's fingers hover over the radio in search of a new station, eventually settling on one. I hear LeAnn Rimes singing "Amazing Grace." Her voice slowly rises over the noise of the bustling room.

"Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear. And Grace, my fears relieved..."

Smiling, I open Jon's Jansport backpack and neatly place this essay inside and a chocolate taffy with a note attached.

Twenty minutes have passed when the door abruptly opens.

“Guess what the doctor just said?” my brother cries, unable to hide his exhilaration.

I look up and I smile too.

- - -

[For analysis of what makes this essay amazing, go [here](#).]

### **THE "PORCELAIN GOD" COLLEGE ESSAY EXAMPLE**

*Essay written for the "topic of your choice" prompt on the 2012 Common Application.*

Bowing down to the porcelain god, I emptied the contents of my stomach. Foaming at the mouth, I was ready to pass out. My body couldn't stop shaking as I gasped for air, and the room started spinning.

Ten minutes prior, I had been eating dinner with my family at a Chinese restaurant, drinking chicken-feet soup. My mom had specifically asked the waitress if there were peanuts in it, because when I was two we found out that I am deathly allergic to them. When the waitress replied no, I went for it. Suddenly I started scratching my neck, feeling the hives that had started to form. I rushed to the restroom to throw up because my throat was itchy and I felt a weight on my chest. I was experiencing anaphylactic shock, which prevented me from taking anything but shallow breaths. I was fighting the one thing that is meant to protect me and keep me alive – my own body.

At five years old, I couldn't comprehend what had happened. All I knew was that I felt sick, and I was waiting for my mom to give me something to make it better. I thought my parents were superheroes; surely they would be able to make well again. But I became scared when I heard the fear in their voices as they rushed me to the ER.

After that incident, I began to fear. I became scared of death, eating, and even my own body. As I grew older, I became paranoid about checking food labels and I avoided eating if I didn't know what was in the food. I knew what could happen if I ate one wrong thing, and I wasn't willing to risk it for a snack. Ultimately, that fear turned into resentment; I resented my body for making me an outsider.

In the years that followed, this experience and my regular visits to my allergy specialist inspired me to become an allergy specialist. Even though I was probably only ten at the time, I wanted to find a way to help kids like me. I wanted to find a solution so that nobody would have to feel the way I did; nobody deserved to feel that pain, fear, and resentment. As I learned more about the medical world, I became more fascinated with the body's immune responses, specifically, how a body reacts to allergens. This past summer, I took a month-long course on human immunology at Stanford University. I learned about the different mechanisms and cells that our bodies use in order to fight off pathogens. My desire to major in biology in college has been stimulated by my fascination with the human body, its processes, and the desire to find a way to help people with allergies. I hope that one day I can find a way to stop allergic reactions or at least lessen the symptoms, so that children and adults don't have to feel the same fear and bitterness that I felt.

### **THE "FIVE FAMILIES" COLLEGE ESSAY EXAMPLE**

When I was 16, I lived with the Watkins family in Wichita, Kansas. Mrs. Watkins was the coordinator of the foreign exchange student program I was enrolled in. She had a nine year old son named Cody. I would babysit Cody every day after school for at least two to three hours. We would play Scrabble or he would read to me from *Charlotte's Web* or *The Ugly Duckling*. He would talk a lot about his friends and school life, and I would listen to him and ask him the meanings of certain words. He was my first friend in the New World.

My second family was the Martinez family, who were friends of the Watkins's. The host dad Michael was a high school English teacher and the host mom Jennifer (who had me call her "Jen") taught elementary school. She had recently delivered a baby, so she was still in the hospital when I moved into their house. The Martinez family did almost everything together. We made pizza together, watched *Shrek* on their cozy couch together, and went fishing on Sunday together. On rainy days, Michael, Jen and I would sit on the porch and listen to the rain, talking about our dreams and thoughts. Within two months I was calling them mom and dad.

After I finished the exchange student program, I had the option of returning to Korea but I decided to stay in America. I wanted to see new places and meet different people. Since I wasn't an exchange student anymore, I had the freedom--and burden--of finding a new school and host family on my own. After a few days of thorough investigation, I found the Struiksmas family in California. They were a unique group.

The host mom Shellie was a single mom who had two of her own sons and two Russian daughters that she had adopted. The kids always had something warm to eat, and were always on their best behavior at home and in school. It would be fair to say that this was all due to Shellie's upbringing. My room was on the first floor, right in front of Shellie's hair salon, a small business that she ran out of her home. In the living room were six or seven huge amplifiers and a gigantic chandelier hung from the high ceiling. The kitchen had a bar. At first, the non-stop visits from strangers made me nervous, but soon I got used to them. I remember one night, a couple barged into my room while I was sleeping. It was awkward.

After a few months I realized we weren't the best fit. In the nicest way possible, I told them I had to leave. They understood.

The Ortiz family was my fourth family. Kimberly, the host mom, treated me the same way she treated her own son. She made me do chores: I fixed dinner, fed their two dogs Sassy and Lady, and once a week I cleaned the bathroom. I also had to follow some rules: No food in my room, no using the family computer, no lights on after midnight, and no ride unless it was an emergency. The first couple of months were really hard to get used to, but eventually I adjusted.

I lived with the Ortiz family for seven months like a monk in the deep forest. However, the host dad Greg's asthma got worse after winter, so he wanted to move to the countryside. It was unexpected and I only had a week to find a new host family. I asked my friend Danielle if I could live with her until I found a new home. That's how I met the Dirksen family, my fifth family.

The Dirksen family had three kids. They were all different. Danielle liked bitter black coffee, Christian liked energy drinks, and Becca liked sweet lemon tea. Dawn, the host mom didn't like winter, and Mark, the host dad, didn't like summer. After dinner, we would all play Wii Sports together. I was the king of bowling, and Dawn was the queen of tennis. I don't remember a single time that they argued about the games. Afterward, we would gather in the living room and Danielle would play the piano while the rest of us sang hymns.

Of course, those 28 months were too short to fully understand all five families, but I learned from and was shaped by each of them. By teaching me English, nine year-old Cody taught me the importance of being able to learn from anyone; the Martinez family showed me the value of spending time together as a family; the

Struiksma family taught me to reserve judgment about divorced women and adopted children; Mrs. Ortiz taught me the value of discipline and the Dirksen family taught me the importance of appreciating one another's different qualities.

Getting along with other people is necessary for anyone and living with five families has made me more sensitive to others' needs: I have learned how to recognize when someone needs to talk, when I should give advice and when to simply listen, and when someone needs to be left alone; in the process, I have become much more adaptable. I'm ready to change, learn, and be shaped by my future families.

### **ANALYSIS OF THE "FIVE FAMILIES" ESSAY**

Remember that movie "The Sixth Sense"?

I won't ruin it for you, but I will tell you that there's a moment toward the end when a crucial piece of information is revealed that triggers in the mind of the audience a series of realizations that have been leading up to this Big Revelation.

That's kind of what this writer does: he buries a series of hints (one in each paragraph) that he "explodes" in the final paragraph. In short:

1. He buries a series of essence images in his first paragraphs (one per family).
2. He doesn't tell us what they mean until the end of the essay, when he writes "I learned and was shaped by each of them." Note that each essence image is actually a lesson--something he learned from each family.
3. When he reveals each lesson at the end, one after the other, we sense how all these seemingly random events are connected. We realize this writer has been carefully constructing this piece all along; we see the underlying structure. And it's a pretty neat one.

Also note:

- Each of the first five paragraphs works to SHOW. (He waits to TELL us what they mean 'til that second to last paragraph.)
- See how distinct each family is? He does this through specific images and objects.
- The second to last paragraph answers the "So what?" question. (Q: Why did he just show us all these details? A: To demonstrate what each family has taught him.)

- He also goes one step further. He answers the “So what?” question once more in the final paragraph. (Q: So what am I going to do with all these lessons? A: I'm going to use them to adapt to my next family--in college.)
- The beauty of this is that he's demonstrating (showing not telling) that he has an extremely valuable quality that will be useful for doing well at any college: adaptability.

*TIP: And that's one more way to [write your essay](#). Identify your single greatest strength (in this case, it was his ability to adapt to whatever life gave him). Ask: how did I learn this? How can I SHOW that I'm good at this?*

### Here are all the “Show” and “Tell” moments clearly marked:

When I was 16, I lived with the Watkins family in Wichita, Kansas. Mrs. Watkins was the coordinator of the foreign exchange student program I was enrolled in. She had a nine year old son named Cody. I would babysit Cody every day after school for at least two to three hours. We would play Scrabble or **he would read to me from Charlotte's Web or The Ugly Duckling. He would talk a lot about his friends and school life, and I would listen to him and ask him the meanings of certain words.** He was my first friend in the New World.

***Show 1: "By teaching me English, nine year-old Cody taught me the importance of being able to learn from anyone."***

My second family was the Martinez family, who were friends of the Watkins's. The host dad Michael was a high school English teacher and the host mom Jennifer (who had me call her “Jen”) taught elementary school. She had recently delivered a baby, so she was still in the hospital when I moved into their house. The Martinez family did almost everything together. We made pizza together, watched Shrek on their cozy couch together, and went fishing on Sunday together. ***On rainy days, Michael, Jen and I would sit on the porch and listen to the rain, talking about our dreams and thoughts. Within two months I was calling them mom and dad.***

***Show 2: "the Martinez family showed me the value of spending time together as a family" (implication: he doesn't have this with his own family)***

After I finished the exchange student program, I had the option of returning to Korea but I decided to stay in America. I wanted to see new places and meet different people. Since I wasn't an exchange student anymore, I had the

freedom--and burden--of finding a new school and host family on my own. After a few days of thorough investigation, I found the Struiksma family in California. They were a unique group.

The host mom **Shellie was a single mom who had two of her own sons and two Russian daughters that she had adopted.** The kids always had something warm to eat, and were always on their best behavior at home and in school. It would be fair to say that this was all due to Shellie's upbringing. My room was on the first floor, **right in front of Shellie's hair salon, a small business that she ran out of her home. In the living room were six or seven huge amplifiers and a gigantic chandelier hung from the high ceiling. The kitchen had a bar. At first, the non-stop visits from strangers** made me nervous, but soon I got used to them. I remember one night, a couple barged into my room while I was sleeping. It was awkward.

**Show 3: "the Struiksma family taught me to reserve judgment about divorced women and adopted children."**

After a few months I realized we weren't the best fit. In the nicest way possible, I told them I had to leave. They understood.

The Ortiz family was my fourth family. Kimberly, the host mom, treated me the same way she treated her own son. **She made me do chores: I fixed dinner, fed their two dogs Sassy and Lady, and once a week I cleaned the bathroom. I also had to follow some rules: No food in my room, no using the family computer, no lights on after midnight, and no ride unless it was an emergency.** The first couple of months were really hard to get used to, but eventually I adjusted.

**I lived with the Ortiz family for seven months like a monk in the deep forest.** However, the host dad Greg's asthma got worse after winter, so he wanted to move to the countryside. It was unexpected and I only had a week to find a new host family. I asked my friend Danielle if I could live with her until I found a new home. That's how I met the Dirksen family, my fifth family.

**Show 4: "Mrs. Ortiz taught me the value of discipline."**

The Dirksen family had three kids. **They were all different. Danielle liked bitter black coffee, Christian liked energy drinks, and Becca liked sweet lemon tea.**

***Dawn, the host mom didn't like winter, and Mark, the host dad, didn't like summer. After dinner, we would all play Wii Sports together. I was the king of bowling, and Dawn was the queen of tennis. I don't remember a single time that they argued about the games.*** Afterward, we would gather in the living room and Danielle would play the piano while the rest of us sang hymns.

***Show 5: "and the Dirksen family taught me the importance of appreciating one another's different qualities."***

Of course, those 28 months were too short to fully understand all five families, but I learned from and was shaped by each of them. ***By teaching me English, nine year-old Cody taught me the importance of being able to learn from anyone; the Martinez family showed me the value of spending time together as a family; the Struiksma family taught me to reserve judgment about divorced women and adopted children; Mrs. Ortiz taught me the value of discipline and the Dirksen family taught me the importance of appreciating one another's different qualities.***

***The "Tell" / "So What"***

***Getting along with other people is necessary for anyone and living with five families has made me more sensitive to others' needs: I have learned how to recognize when someone needs to talk, when I should give advice and when to simply listen, and when someone needs to be left alone; in the process, I have become much more adaptable. I'm ready to change, learn, and be shaped by my future families.***

## **THE "YEARBOOK" EXAMPLE UC ESSAY**

*This essay was written for a scholarship at UCLA, but will work for a variety of topics, including several of the UC prompts:*

"Okay everyone, we have 9 more hours before deadline, let's make this happen!"

The room erupts. The Student Life editor is in agony because his Siblings page needs two reshoots, and he has one shot at getting good pictures.

"Make it work!" someone from Arts shouts, as she helps pull out umbrella strobes and reflectors for the Play Production shoot. Further down the line of computers, a

Tech Arts guy is working with a girl from Academics on proofing the cover graphics, while a mixed group heads out to interview students for the people pages.

This is what it takes to win Best High School Yearbook at both the state and national levels.

I remember in ninth grade thinking how cool it'd be to be on yearbook. Yearbook kids knew which classes everyone was in, they knew which kids were into what extracurricular, and perhaps most importantly, they knew everyone at school. From freshmen to seniors to faculty, yearbook gave them a connection to everyone. Yearbook kids radiated serene confidence in themselves and their work. At my school, that's how it is: yearbook is a mini-company of 20.

## **SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY EXAMPLES**

### **UCHICAGO SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY EXAMPLES**

#### **THE "WHY DID THE CHICKEN CROSS THE ROAD" ESSAY**

*This essay was written for the U of Chicago "Create your own prompt" essay. The author included the following explanatory note:*

I plan to double major in biochemistry and English and my main essay explains my passion for the former; here is a writing sample that illustrates my enthusiasm for the latter.

In my AP Literature class, my teacher posed a question to which students had to write a creative response. My response is framed around the ideas of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave."

Q: Why did the chicken cross the road?

A: A manicured green field of grass blades cut to perfectly matched lengths; a blue expanse ornamented with puffy cotton clouds; an immaculately painted red barn centered exactly at the top of a hill--the chicken gazes contentedly at his picturesque world. Within an area surrounded by a shiny silver fence, he looks around at his friends: roosters pecking at a feast of grains and hens lounging on luxurious cushions of hay. As the nice man in a plaid shirt and blue jeans collects the

hens' eggs, the chicken feels an overwhelming sense of indebtedness to him for providing this idyllic lifestyle.

On a day as pristine as all the others, the chicken is happily eating his lunchtime meal as the nice man carefully gathers the smooth white eggs when it notices that the man has left one behind. Strangely located at the empty end of the metal enclosure, highlighted by the bright yellow sun, the white egg appears to the chicken different from the rest. The chicken moves towards the light to tacitly inform the man of his mistake. But then the chicken notices a jagged gray line on the otherwise flawless egg. Hypnotized and appalled, the chicken watches as the line turns into a crack and a small beak attached to a fuzzy yellow head pokes out. Suddenly a shadow descends over the chicken and the nice man snatches the egg--the baby chick--and stomps off.

The chicken--confused, betrayed, disturbed--slowly lifts its eyes from the now empty ground. For the first time, it looks past the silver fence of the cage and notices an unkempt sweep of colossal brown and green grasses opposite its impeccably crafted surroundings. Cautiously, it inches closer to the barrier, farther from the unbelievable perfection of the farm, and discovers a wide sea of black gravel. Stained with gray stones and marked with yellow lines, it separates the chicken from the opposite field.

The curious chicken quickly shuffles to Mother Hen, who has just settled on to her throne of hay and is closing her eyes. He is sure that the always composed and compassionate chicken will help him make sense of what he's just seen.

"Mother Hen, Mother Hen! I-I just saw one of those eggs, cracking, and there was a small yellow bird inside. It was a baby. Are those eggs that the nice man takes away babies? And that black ground! What is it?" the chicken blurts out.

Her eyes flick open. "BOK BOK! Don't you ever dare speak of what you have seen again," Mother Hen snaps in a low and violent whisper, "or all of this will be taken away." Closing her eyes again, she dismisses the chicken.

Frozen in disbelief, the chicken tries to make sense of her harsh words. It replays the incident in its head. "All the food, the nice soft hay, the flawless red barn--maybe all of this isn't worth giving up. Maybe Mother Hen is right. She just wants to protect me from losing it all." The chicken replays the incident again. "But it was a baby. What if it was hers? She still wouldn't care. She's being selfish; all she cares about is this

perfect life." A final replay, and the chicken realizes and accepts that Mother Hen knows, has known, that the man is doing something wrong; yet she has yielded to the cruelty for her own comfort. A fissure in the chicken's unawareness, a plan begins to hatch. The chicken knows it must escape; it has to get to the other side.

"That man in the plaid shirt is stealing the eggs from their mothers again," the chicken thinks the next day as he unlocks the cage. Then the man reaches into the wooden coop, his back to the entrance. "Now!" At its own cue, the chicken scurries towards the opening and exits unseen. With a backwards glance at his friends, the chicken feels a profound sadness and pity for their ignorance. It wants to urge them to open their eyes, to see what they are sacrificing for materialistic pleasures, but he knows they will not surrender the false reality. Alone, the chicken dashes away.

The chicken stands at the line between green grass and black gravel. As it prepares to take its first step into the unknown, a monstrous vehicle with 18 wheels made of metal whizzes by, leaving behind a trail of gray exhaust. Once it regains its breath, it moves a few inches onto the asphalt. Three more speeding trucks stop its chicken heart.

"I can't do this," it says to itself. "These monsters are a sign. They're telling me to go back. Besides, a few lost chicks aren't so bad. The man's not that evil. He gives us food, and a home."

But the chicken dismisses the cowardly voice in its head, reminding itself of the injustice back in the deceptively charming prison. Over the next several hours, it learns to strategically position itself so that it is in line with the empty space between the tires of passing trucks. It reaches the yellow dashes. A black blanket gradually pushes away the glowing sun and replaces it with diamond stars and a glowing crescent. It reaches the untouched field.

With a deep breath, the chicken steps into the swathe, a world of tall beige grass made brown by the darkness. Unsure of what it may discover, it determines to simply walk straight through the brush, out on to the other side. For what seems like forever, it continues forward, as the black sky turns to purple, then blue, then pink. Just as the chicken begins to regret its journey, the grass gives way to a vast landscape of trees, bushes, flowers--heterogeneous and variable, but nonetheless perfect. In a nearby tree, the chicken spots two adult birds tending to a nest of babies--a natural dynamic of individuals unaltered by corrupt influence.

And then it dawns on him. It has escaped from a contrived and perverted domain as well as its own unawareness; it has arrived in a place where the pure order of the world reigns.

"I know the truth now," it thinks to himself as the sun rises. "But here, in Nature, it is of no use. Back home, I need to try to foster awareness among my friends, share this understanding with them. Otherwise, I am as cruel as the man in the plaid shirt, taking away the opportunity to overcome ignorance.

"I must return now; I have to get to the other side.

[I analyze why I think this essay works in [The Complete Guide, Session 6](#).]

### **THE "ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS" UCHICAGO SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY EXAMPLE**

*Essay written for the University of Chicago prompt, which asks you to create your own prompt.*

Prompt:

Dear Christian, the admissions staff at the University of Chicago would like to inform you that your application has been "put on the line." We have one spot left and can't decide if we should admit you or another equally qualified applicant. To resolve the matter, please choose one of the following:

Rock, paper, or scissors.

You will be notified of our decision shortly.

Response:

Rock beats scissors, scissors beats paper, and paper beats rock. Wait... paper beats rock? Since when has a sheet of loose leaf paper ever defeated a solid block of granite? Do we assume that the paper wraps around the rock, smothering the rock into submission? When exposed to paper, is rock somehow immobilized, unable to fulfill its primary function of smashing scissors? What constitutes defeat between two inanimate objects?

Maybe it's all a metaphor for larger ideals. Perhaps paper is rooted in the symbolism of diplomacy while rock suggests coercion. But does compromise necessarily trump brute force? And where do scissors lie in this chain of symbolism?

I guess the reasoning behind this game has a lot to do with context. If we are to rationalize the logic behind this game, we have to assume some kind of narrative, an instance in which paper might beat rock. Unfortunately, I can't argue for a convincing one.

As with rock-paper-scissors, we often cut our narratives short to make the games we play easier, ignoring the intricate assumptions that keep the game running smoothly. Like rock-paper-scissors, we tend to accept something not because it's true, but because it's the convenient route to getting things accomplished. We accept incomplete narratives when they serve us well, overlooking their logical gaps. Other times, we exaggerate even the smallest defects and uncertainties in narratives we don't want to deal with. In a world where we know very little about the nature of "Truth," it's very easy—and tempting—to construct stories around truth claims that unfairly legitimize or delegitimize the games we play.

Or maybe I'm just making a big deal out of nothing...

Fine. I'll stop with the semantics and play your game.

But who actually wants to play a game of rock-paper-scissors? After all, isn't it just a game of random luck, requiring zero skill and talent? That's no way to admit someone!

Wrong.

Studies have shown that there are winning strategies to rock-paper-scissors by making critical assumptions about those we play against before the round has even started. Douglas Walker, host of the Rock-Paper-Scissors World Championships (didn't know that existed either), conducted research indicating that males will use rock as their opening move 50% of the time, a gesture Walker believes is due to rock's symbolic association with strength and force. In this sense, the seemingly innocuous game of rock-paper-scissors has revealed something quite discomfiting about gender-related dispositions in our society. Why did so many males think that brute strength was the best option? If social standards have subliminally influenced the way males and females play rock-paper-scissors, than

what is to prevent such biases from skewing more important decisions? Should your decision to go to war or to feed the hungry depend on your gender, race, creed, etc?

Perhaps the narratives I spoke of earlier, the stories I mistakenly labeled as “semantics,” carry real weight in our everyday decisions. In the case of Walker’s study, men unconsciously created an irrational narrative around an abstract rock. We all tell slightly different narratives when we independently consider notions ranging from rocks to war to existence. It is ultimately the unconscious gaps in these narratives that are responsible for many of the man-made problems this world faces. In order for the “life of the mind” to be a worthwhile endeavor, we must challenge the unconscious narratives we attach to the larger games we play—the truths we tell (or don’t tell), the lessons we learn (or haven’t really learned), the people we meet (or haven’t truly met).

But even after all of this, we still don’t completely understand the narrative behind rock-paper-scissors.

I guess it all comes down to who actually made this silly game in the first place... I’d like to think it was some snotty 3rd grader, but then again, that’s just another incomplete narrative.

## U OF MICHIGAN SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY EXAMPLE

### THE “EAST MEETS WEST” EXAMPLE ESSAY

*This was written for the U. of Michigan supplemental “community” essay prompt, then adapted for a (no longer existent) essay for Brown. The Michigan prompt reads:*

*Everyone belongs to many different communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, ethnicity, income, cuisine, interest, race, ideology, or intellectual heritage. Choose one of the communities to which you belong, and describe that community and your place within it.*

*Here’s the essay:*

I look around my room, dimly lit by an orange light. On a desk in the left corner, a framed picture of an Asian family is beaming their smiles, buried among US history textbooks and *The Great Gatsby*. A Korean ballad streams from a pair of tiny

computer speakers. Pamphlets of American colleges are scattered about on the floor. A cold December wind wafts a strange infusion of ramen and leftover pizza. On the wall in the far back, a Korean flag hangs besides a Led Zeppelin poster.

Do I consider myself Korean or American?

A few years back, I would have replied: "Neither." The frustrating moments of miscommunication, the stifling homesickness, and the impossible dilemma of deciding between the Korean or American table in the dining hall, all fueled my identity crisis.

Standing in the "Foreign Passports" section at JFK, I have always felt out of place. Sure, I held a Korean passport in my hands, and I loved kimchi and Yuna Kim and knew the Korean Anthem by heart. But I also loved macaroni and cheese and LeBron and knew all the Red Hot Chili Peppers songs by heart. Deep inside, I feared that I would simply be labeled as what I am categorized at airport customs: a foreigner in all places.

This ambiguity of existence, however, has granted me the opportunity to absorb the best of both worlds. Take a look at my dorm room. This *mélange* of cultures in my East-meets-West room embodies the diversity that characterizes my international student life.

I have learned to accept my "ambiguity" as "diversity," as a third-culture student embracing both identities in this diverse community that I am blessed to be a part of.

Do I consider myself Korean or American?

Now, I can proudly answer: "Both."