

## Sample Common App Essay

“Alright,” said the Boss, leaning back into his chair. His mouth hardened into a line of disapproval, all a part of the act. “Do something funny.”

*Something funny?* Twenty sets of eyes focused on me, waiting for me to make them laugh. In that moment, my body froze. My pulse raced. My cheeks flushed, rivaling the redness of the plastic sphere tied to my nose.

“I can’t,” I sputtered. The words felt foreign in my dry mouth. My typical enthusiasm and confidence was lost somewhere between the folds of the curtain backstage, and I was stuck. I was on the verge of tears. Who knew that being an absolute fool was so difficult?

Let me clarify: When I learned I was selected for the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program for theatre, I had no idea I would be attending clown school. I love Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, and the occasional David Ives comedy; I knew nothing about the art of clowning, which revolves around physical freeness and spontaneity. Around my peers and family, I am a master of “goofballery,” a millennial style Lucille Ball. I usually have no qualms about making a fool of myself. When it comes to something as important to me as my art, however, I found I was having a hard time tapping into this levity.

All my life I have been a perfectionist. I want to set my pins *and* knock them down. I am a goal setter, the wilder the better: I want to hike the entirety of the Appalachian Trail; I want to perform on Broadway, and mitigate climate change. I am not afraid of risk, or at least I thought I wasn’t. I wasn’t afraid to pack up and leave the comforts of home last year for an outdoor boarding school in the mountains. I wasn’t afraid of performing a ballad to a packed house for the Spring musical. I embraced my fears when I rappelled 300 feet down “The Monkey Face” Spire. I relish taking on difficult tasks, organizing large groups, and working under pressure. But reality hit me hard last July, when I faced a difficult task and had nowhere to go. There was only the current moment, and that was terrifying.

I’ve spent so much of my life over-thinking, scratching my skin and worrying in circles. The future pulls my mind forward, occupying precious space with preoccupations of an unseen tomorrow, while my body is tugged back, reminded of past mistakes and regrets. It’s taken me years to understand that life is a collection of “nows,” every one limitless. While nothing excites me more than the prospect of new experiences, taking risk isn’t running off to the next adventure, or jumping on every opportunity that blows by. It’s staying put and leaning into those tasks and feelings that truly challenge me.

Though I didn’t succeed that week, I had a revelation. I began to connect with the clown. Its open, loving, and sometimes idiotic nature helped me uncover a side of myself that I had suppressed for too long in my attempts to get everything “right.” The summer I tried clowning, I learned the beauty of letting go. I learned to enjoy the view from the top of the tightrope of chance, rather than dread the fall downward.

Eliza Renner, Middlebury College (2013)

## **The following essays are excerpted From *Heavenly Essays*, by Janine Robinson**

### **Hang Ups**

Brock Csira, University of California, Berkeley, CA

Dangling about 30 feet above the ground, I looked down on the entire neighborhood park with its rolling hills, vibrant green grass, and multiple tall eucalyptus trees. Buckled tightly in my brand new Diamond Mountain climbing harness, I admired my handiwork.

My old blue-and-black braided climbing rope thrown over a branch held me aloft, while a slipknot I tied while hoisting myself up prevented my descent. After a few minutes, I decided to return to the ground, but realized my knot grew too tight for me to untie. I was stuck.

Ever since my dad taught me the Bowline in second grade, the intricacy of knots has fascinated me. I spent hours mastering the craft, reading every knot book and website I could get my hands on. All my knots usually came in handy. In 8th grade, I won a competition in the Boy Scouts with a square knot, beating the instructor who taught an alternative knot that took longer to tie. A couple years later, I rescued my brother's pickup out of the mud with the unbreakable loop of the Bow Line during one of our off-road adventures. I even returned a stranded rock climber's lifeline by tying a Sheep's Bend between a small piece of paracord and his climbing rope.

Ironically, on the day I got stuck in the tree, I spent all morning trying to finally conquer the biggest and baddest knot of them all: the Monkey's Fist. After at least 50 failed attempts at the step-by-step process, my trusty blue rope finally bore the complex, dense sphere of rope. With a heavy Monkey's Fist on the end of my rope, I could throw an end over any branch.

After hoisting myself into the treetops that day I dangled for several hours due to that hastily tied Slip Knot. When my dad finally returned from work and saw me, he lugged over an extension ladder, and laughed as he untied me from the tangle he inspired years earlier.

When I reflected on this adventure, I realized another irony in the situation: It took a complex knot like the Monkey's First to elevate me into the tree, but a simple Slip Knot stopped me from getting back down. Comparing these knots, I learned that the effort and persistence I invest in a challenge like tying a knot translates into a certain lasting power.

A Slip Knot is extremely easy to tie, but disappears with a quick pull on the rope. However, a Monkey's Fist takes hours to learn and minutes to tie, but is impossible to untie. In so many other parts of my life I have experienced this similar relationship: that the more I try, the more useful and permanent the reward.

I expect that my knot-tying adventures, and the related lessons, even the most embarrassing ones, will help me through any future hang ups I encounter from here on out.

## **Call Me Crazy**

Brooks Johnson, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA

After two hours of intense racing on the open water, we thought our day was done. Instead, our coach ordered us to race another five miles home, rowing as hard as when we came. Stuck in the middle of the harbor with seven other teammates in the crew boat, there was nowhere to hide.

“Give me a reason to call 911,” coach yelled. Drained and exhausted, I could feel my eyes starting to close. Tunnel vision set in. For a few moments, I blacked out. I had been here before. This was the point where I had to push my body to do the opposite of what my brain wanted me to do: Go even harder. I focused on the coxswain yelling at me, and hoped my adrenaline wouldn’t wear off.

When I first joined the team as a freshman, I only knew a little about this sport. My older brother warned me about the ridiculous hours and tough workouts. The one thing no one told me, though, is that to row crew you had to be a little crazy. It’s not the mentally insane type of crazy, but the type where you force yourself to disregard all logic and reason and push yourself to keep going.

After four years of rowing crew, I realized that this was exactly what I loved. This zone that I get into allowed me to break down new mental and physical boundaries every day. It gave me the satisfaction of knowing I went harder than any other previous day. I never even knew I had this type of mindset until I started crew. Not only did this bring out my new mindset, but it grew each day. Every day I looked forward to pushing myself to my limits—and then climbing down deeper into that well to exceed my prior limits.

When I first started crew, my coach encouraged me to go into what he called our “dark place.” This “dark place” was where my mind retreated when I was in extreme pain while rowing. Knowing that it was only my mind holding me back from going any harder, I learned to reverse my thinking so I almost craved the pain to make myself go faster. It wasn’t until recently that I realized how much crew shaped my life and how I’ve changed over the course of it. My intensity, drive, but mainly the nature of my competitiveness has been somehow honed, sharpened and brought to light for me.

Now, when I’m supposed to stop, or feel something is trying to hold me back, all I want to do is push harder to break through it. Now, if I didn’t do well on a test, I challenged myself to do better on my next one by doing whatever it took to prepare, and then some extra on top of that. I’ve also started using the idea from crew where the top guys push the bottom guys to spur a competitive collaborative environment in my classes and with friends.

While I’m conscious of this internal competitiveness almost all of the time, I don’t feel crazy. I feel motivated and empowered. Even when we raced back on fumes after that grueling workout in the harbor, I couldn’t believe how invigorated and strong I felt once back on land. As we brought in the boats, my teammates and I re-capped the painful details, laughing at the same time. None of us could wait for the next day to break another barrier. Call us crazy. We like it that way.

## **A Small World**

Duncan Lynd, California State University, Long Beach, CA

While grabbing lunch between games at a water polo tournament, I noticed one of my new teammates rarely looked me in the eye. Instead of taking the empty seat next to me, he opted to sit across the table. Even when I tried to start a conversation with him, he only looked down, and mumbled, "Oh, hey," and walked away.

This type of cold-shoulder treatment wasn't new to me. I'm a big guy. In bare feet, I'm about 6 feet 7 inches tall, and I'm pushing 300 pounds. Yes, it can be a pain. I bump my head going through doorways, I don't fit in most mid-size cars, and I can barely squeeze into most classroom desks. But I understand that the world is made for average-sized people, and I like to think I'm above average. One thing, however, is hard for me to take: People who don't know me assume I'm mean.

Like my frosty water polo teammate. I understand why he was intimidated by me, especially since he was one of the smaller players. I would have felt the same way. When I meet people for the first time, I often draw conclusions or make assumptions. Almost all my life, I've had to deal with the expectations and judgments people make about me just because I'm often the largest kid in the room. Ever since I was a kid there has been pressure for me to perform athletically because of my size and strength. When I went to grocery store, random people consistently asked me if I played football. When I told them, "No," the men always lectured me not only about why I should play football, but what I should be doing with my life, with my body, and with my potential. I normally just nodded and smiled, but it bothered me that they thought they knew what was best for me.

Not only did I never play football, but I defied many of the assumptions people made about me. How many people my size love nothing more than mixing up a chocolate batter, and decorating a three-layer cake? Beside my passion for baking, I also love working with little kids. For the last two summers, I volunteered at a camp where I taught kids how to surf. My nickname was Teddy Bear. And if I wanted to make my friends fall on the ground laughing, I reminded them of my dream to learn to play the violin.

In general, I ignore what people say to me or think about me when it comes to my size. Instead of reacting, I usually just give them a smile. On many levels, there are advantages to towering over most of the world. I always get the front seat since I don't fit in the back. No one even dares call "shotgun." I usually have the best seat in the house, whether it's a rock concert or a ball game, no matter where I sit. And if people are getting rowdy and making my friends uncomfortable, all I need to do is step in the middle and simply ask, "What's going on?" and they disperse.

Even the people who are intimidated at first by me eventually come around once they get to know me. Like the water polo player at the restaurant. Within about two weeks, we finally had a conversation and ended up finding we had a lot in common. In fact, he ended up as my best friend. For me, it is a small world after all, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

## Trash Talk

Reece Barton

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On our way to get fish tacos, about eight blocks from my house, I spotted the sign out of the corner of my eye. "Stop the car!" I shouted. Blake slammed on the brakes and threw the car into reverse. My eyes hadn't deceived me, the hand-written sign read: "Free Trampoline."

Ever since I can remember, I have loved turning other people's trash into my personal treasures. I cannot walk past a garage sale without digging through the neighbor's junk. Over the years, I have even decorated my room with accessories from various sales and giveaways.

I scored my giant box television from a church sale, towed my slipcovered couch home from my neighbor's yard sale, and rescued old-school street signs that decorate my walls from my grandma's trash. So, when I saw the sign for a free trampoline, I knew I had to make it mine.

To most, a 10-year-old trampoline wouldn't be worth dragging home, but to me, it was almost too good to be true. By bribing my friends with free tacos, I convinced them to follow the sign leading to the trampoline, and we pulled up to the house. Ahead of us were three flights of stairs up to the backyard. I jumped out of the car and, scared that someone might beat me to the front door, I sprinted up the stairs.

After what seemed like an eternity, a man answered the door. Out of breath, I asked if the trampoline was still available. "Yeah, it's out back," he said, pointing out beyond a glass door. I nearly dropped to my knees with joy.

Even though the trampoline wasn't in the best shape, it was much bigger than I imagined and all the necessary parts were there. "The deal is, if you can take it apart and out of my house, you can have it," the man called up. My jaw hit the floor. I couldn't believe this could be mine for next to nothing.

After two hours of disassembling it piece by piece, my friends and I wrestled and rolled it down the stairs, finally hoisting it onto the roof of my friend's Jetta. We didn't have any rope, so four of us walked alongside the car, supporting each corner of the trampoline all eight blocks back to my house. Drivers honked and shouted at us, but it didn't slow us down. Within an hour we had it assembled in my backyard, and we were soon lounging on the trampoline, chowing down on fish tacos.

Sometimes, I surprise myself by how far I will go to hunt down a good deal. To me, however, the deal is just the beginning. I love creating useful things out of other people's junk.

Just last week, I built a shelving system out of some scrap wood and mini-fans for my friend that was moving to college. Last winter, I made a makeshift bobsled out of two old snowboards and shopping cart wheels. I've learned that things don't lose their value after a few years of wear and tear. My neighbors' trash literally is my treasure. new journey in which I will prove all those who doubted me wrong.

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