

Example College/Common Application Essays

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Directions: Read through the following essays and make notes as to how they work. What makes the essay interesting? How does it begin? What words contribute to the tone (how does diction shape tone)? What literary or rhetorical devices are present? How does the author reveal an aspect of his/her/themselves? What do you feel about the essay overall?

Shaan Merchant '19**

Nashville, TN

“Biogeochemical. It's a word, I promise!” There are shrieks and shouts in protest and support. Unacceptable insults are thrown, degrees and qualifications are questioned, I think even a piece of my grandmother's famously flakey parantha whizzes past my ear. Everyone is too lazy to take out a dictionary (or even their phones) to look it up, so we just hash it out. And then, I am crowned the victor, a true success in the Merchant household. But it is fleeting, as the small, glossy, plastic tiles, perfectly connected to form my winning word, are snatched out from under me and thrown in a pile with all the disgraced, “unwinning” tiles as we mix for our next game of Bananagrams. It's a similar donnybrook, this time ending with my father arguing that it is okay to use “Rambo” as a word (it totally is not).

Words and communicating have always been of tremendous importance in my life: from silly games like Bananagrams and our road-trip favorite “word game,” to stunted communication between opposing grandparents, each speaking a different Indian language; from trying to understand the cheesemonger behind the counter with a deep southern drawl (I just want some Camembert!), to shaping a script to make people laugh.

Words are moving and changing; they have influence and substance. Words, as I like them, create powerful flavor combinations in a recipe or (hopefully) powerful guffaws from a stand-up joke. They make people laugh with unexpected storylines at an improv show and make people cry with mouthwatering descriptions of crisp green beans lathered with potently salty and delightfully creamy fish sauce vinaigrette at Girl and the Goat. Words create everything I love (except maybe my dog and my mom, but you know, the ideas). The thought that something this small, a word, can combine to create a huge concept, just like each small reaction that makes up different biogeochemical cycles (it's a stretch, I know), is truly amazing.

After those aggressive games, my family is quickly able to, in the words of a fellow Nashvillian, “shake it off.” We gather around bowls of my grandmother's steaming rice and cumin-spiced chicken (food is always, always at the center of it), and enjoy. By the end of the meal, our words have changed, changed from the belligerent razzle dazzle of moments before to fart jokes and grandparental concern over the state of our bowels.

Katherine Glass '18**

Dana Hall School, MA

A portrait of Julia Child leans precariously on my bedside table competing for space with sticky notes, pennies, and a plastic alarm clock. Julia has been my role model ever since I spent an hour at the Smithsonian American History Museum watching cooking show after cooking show. As she dropped eggs, burnt soufflés, and prepared a whole pig, she never took herself too seriously and with her goofy smile and accompanying laugh. And yet, she was as successful in her field as anyone could ever be. Her passion completely guided her career. She taught me that it does not matter what I choose to do, it only matters that I do it with my whole self; zealously and humorously.

Unlike Julia, I do not aspire to be a chef. Brownies out of a box may just be the highlight of my baking career. Something I have been passionate about for my whole life, however, is teaching. The first traces of my excitement came from a summer camp that I founded when I was seven years old. Motivated by too many imperfect summer camp experiences, I established my ideal summer camp, one in which campers could choose their activities, from banana split tutorials to wacky hat-making. So that year it began, with seven five-year-old campers in my backyard. For six consecutive years, I ran my summer camp, each year tweaking and improving from the years before.

Chebeague Island, Maine, established a preschool in the spring of 2012, run out of a trailer by a recent college graduate. I volunteered as an intern. For three months, I helped organize for the summer and the following year. I took out the trash, cleaned, and sorted toys, all while studying how to incorporate educational material into preschool activities. I wrote curriculum and researched preschool regulations to ensure that we were in compliance. We created a safe

classroom, an academic plan for the upcoming year, and a balance between learning and playing in the classroom. By the end of the summer the intern became the co-director of the summer preschool program.

This past June, I returned to the trailer to find the space and program in complete disarray. Since the previous summer, the preschool had seen two new directors and the latest was spread thin, juggling maintenance, finances and curriculum planning. My progress had not endured. After sulking for a week, I decided I was better suited to envelop Julia's mentality. What did she do when she flipped a burger onto the ground? She smiled, laughed at the camera, picked it up, reshaped it a little, and kept right on going. So that's what I did. I brought in a group of friends to clean and organize the trailer. I initiated a "lobster-roll" fundraiser, and Island lobstermen donated lobsters while their wives came together to pick meat from the shells. It was wildly successful and thrived on the community's spirit. Then I worked to reinstate some sort of educational value into the summer program. We danced to Spanish and Ghanaian music, crafted wacky hats, and read books about the lobstering industry, an aspect of their community that is so significant.

My past two summers have been exhausting and all too frequently frustrating but ultimately the Chebeague Island Preschool, along with many other teaching experiences, has exposed me to the ground level of education policy in the United States. After this past summer my goal is to become a future U.S. Secretary of Education.

So my portrait of Julia is by my bedside to remind me. Remind me that throughout the tedium of my extremely busy life there is something that I am passionate about. To remind me that personality and humor are essential to success. And remind me that the sort of passion I need to succeed is not the type that will let me give in to small setbacks along the way.

Bridget Collins '19**

North Andover, MA

I have always loved riding in cars. After a long day in first grade, I used to fall asleep to the engine purring in my mother's Honda Odyssey, even though it was only a 5-minute drive home. As I grew, and graduated into the shotgun seat, it became natural and enjoyable to look out the window. Seeing my world passing by through that smudged glass, I would daydream what I could do with it.

In elementary school, I already knew my career path: I was going to be Emperor of the World. While I sat in the car and watched the miles pass by, I developed the plan for my empire. I reasoned that, for the world to run smoothly, it would have to look presentable. I would assign people, aptly named Fixer-Uppers, to fix everything that needed fixing. That old man down the street with chipping paint on his house would have a fresh coat in no time. The boy who accidentally tossed his Frisbee onto the roof of the school would get it back. The big pothole on Elm Street that my mother managed to hit every single day on the way to school would be filled-in. It made perfect sense! All the people that didn't have a job could be Fixer-Uppers. I was like a ten-year-old FDR.

Seven years down the road, I still take a second glance at the sidewalk cracks and think of my Fixer-Uppers, but now I'm doing so from the driver's seat. As much as I would enjoy it, I now accept that I won't become Emperor of the World, and that the Fixer-Uppers will have to remain in my car ride imaginings. Or do they? I always pictured a Fixer-Upper as a smiling man in an orange T-Shirt. Maybe instead, a Fixer-Upper could be a tall girl with a deep love for Yankee Candles. Maybe it could be me.

Bridget the Fixer-Upper will be slightly different than the imaginary one who paints houses and fetches Frisbees. I was lucky enough to discover what I am passionate about when I was a freshman in high school. A self-admitted Phys. Ed. addict, I volunteered to help out with the Adapted PE class. On my first day, I learned that it was for developmentally-disabled students. To be honest, I was really nervous. I hadn't had too much interaction with special needs students before, and wasn't sure how to handle myself around them. Long story short, I got hooked. Three years have passed helping out in APE and eventually becoming a teacher in the Applied Behavior Analysis summer program. I love working with the students and watching them progress.

When senior year arrived, college meetings began, and my counselor asked me what I wanted to do for a career, I didn't say Emperor of the World. Instead, I told him I wanted to become a board-certified behavior analyst. A BCBA helps develop learning plans for students with autism and other disabilities. Basically, I would get to do what I love for the rest of my life. He laughed and told me that it was a nice change that a seventeen-year-old knew so specifically what she wanted to do. I smiled, thanked him, and left. But it occurred to me that, while my desired occupation was decided, my true goal in life was still to become a Fixer-Upper. So, maybe I'll be like Sue Storm and her alter-ego, the Invisible Woman. I'll do one thing during the day, then spend my off-hours helping people where I can. Instead of flying like Sue, though, I'll opt for a nice performance automobile. My childhood self would appreciate that.

Aubrey Anderson '19**
Eugene, OR

My eyes are flickering across the pages as I sit in my room reading a book, but my mind is elsewhere. I'm focused on quantum computing and cryptography. Suddenly, I'm starting to understand Shor's quantum factoring algorithm. It doesn't make sense why that understanding is arising now, but that's what happens to me. I jump up from my bed to type at my computer, trying to take advantage of the moment of clarity. My mind is completely focused on the task at hand. I switch off my music, plunging myself into a place of utmost concentration. Each minute I spend writing, my understanding increases.

This mental state where everything starts to make sense is the place I feel most content. It's an exciting place to be. I'm discovering how things link up for myself. I feel a sense of relief and vindication for choosing "Quantum Computing and Its Effect on Modern Cryptography" as the topic of my senior paper. Trying to teach myself about quantum computing and its relation to cryptographic problems didn't turn out to be as crazy as my friends told me it would be.

This state of discovery is something I strive for on a daily basis. My goal is to make all the ideas in my mind fit together like the gears of a Swiss watch. Whether it's learning a new concept in linear algebra, talking to someone about a programming problem, or simply zoning out while I read, there is always some part of my day that pushes me towards this place of cohesion: an idea that binds together some set of the unsolved mysteries in my mind.

The instant I get an idea for a project I'm working on, that idea stays at the front of my mind until I get a chance to fully process it. The time I spend processing these ideas is the best part of my day. It's a chance to see how the most unrelated parts of my life fit together. They always seem to, somehow.

When my history teacher assigned a final project for the Communist Russia unit, she dictated that it could be anything but an essay. While brainstorming ideas, I overheard a friend mention baking. That sent my mind into a flurry of ideas. As I thought through my various baking projects, an image of a hammer-and-sickle shaped brioche flashed into my thoughts. To make it an actual academic project, I decided to include analysis in the form of small flags topping the loaves which presented the various pros and cons of Communism. While I made the requisite four batches of dough, I settled into my place of discovery as I figured out how to create the communist symbol from bread. Each part came to life as a combination of chocolate, orange, and plain brioche. The day we brought our projects to class, the communist symbol quickly fell apart as it was utilized as food for my hungry classmates. Apparently our new class motto should be "To each according to his appetite."

Seeing how things fit together and work in the world is my passion. People always seem so anxious to know why things aren't going the way they expect them to. I like to have the full picture so I can help them understand the phenomenon to the best of my ability. I pay attention to and glean knowledge from everything. Much of this information is useful as a way make sense of why the world works. I want to understand the big picture and its relation to the minutia of the world because that is the best way for me to gain the broadest and deepest understanding. The moments when my knowledge becomes cohesive are where I am perfectly content.

**All example essays provided by the Tufts Admissions Office: <http://admissions.tufts.edu/apply/advice/past-essays/common-application-essays/>

About Tufts:

"Tufts has grown from a small liberal arts college to a medium-sized research university. In 1954 "Tufts College" became "Tufts University." Today, there are over 5000 undergraduates at Tufts and top-ranked graduate programs in the arts, sciences, humanities, social sciences, engineering, medicine, nutrition, and international relations. Among these programs are the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, the oldest graduate school of international relations in the United States, the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, the only veterinary school in New England, and the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, the only graduate school of nutrition in North America." ---Tufts Admissions Office blub

Carleton Essay #1:***

Everything is beautiful in Old Town of Albuquerque, New Mexico. The weather is perfect for me: hot and dry. The food is delicious, always zippy and flavorful. Meat, beans, and rice are complimented by mouth-watering sopapillas fresh from frying, hot enough to scald my hands and give the honey I drizzle on them the consistency of water. Art abounds, in forms both traditional and contemporary. Pottery in all sizes, from many pueblos, seems so perfect as to be inhuman. Jewelry sellers line the square, each displaying a multitude of finely-crafted ornaments that glow against the coarse blankets on which they lay. Every merchant has at least one design that uses my namesake, mother of pearl.

That is what my Indian name means, and in Kiresan (the language of the Laguna pueblo) it is Wah-puh-ñee. It was given to me by my paternal great-grandmother, the former matriarch of our family. She's my tie to Albuquerque, the root of the family who lives or lived there. Over time, her children and their children dispersed, pursuing education, employment, love, and adventure. Now it's only my great-aunt and her husband who remain, and even they have moved off the reservation. Although we live far away now, we all come back occasionally, glad to once again see the place which innately feels like home.

This summer, my mother and I were once again brought to New Mexico by my father. His health was tenuous most of my life, and before he died in April of 2004, he told us that he wanted his ashes spread on Mt. Taylor, a low peak a few hours outside of Albuquerque. Though it took us more than four years to prepare for the event, we finally accomplished it in July. On the way to the mountain, we got lost several times, our little compact unsuited to the rugged roads of the most direct route. Eventually, though, we were winding our way upwards, nearing the place considered sacred by the tribe. After hunting a little while for the perfect spot, rejecting several that weren't just *right*, we found the site. Shaded by thin conifers and overlooking a shallow gorge, my mother and I let my father go at last. A mellow breeze scattered his ashes farther than our hands could reach, and earth still damp from an unusual rain two nights before soaked him in. While we both mourned this final loss, at the same time, we knew how right it was that he had been returned to nature.

This was the first time I've been to New Mexico since he died. Our return brought so much back for me. I remembered all the times we'd visited when I was younger, certain events highlighted by the things we did: Dad haggling with the jewelry sellers, his minute examination of pots at a trading post, the affection he had for chilies. I was scared that my love for the place would be tainted by his death, diminished without him there as my guide. That fear was part of what kept my mother and me away for so long. Once there, though, I was relieved to realize that Albuquerque still brings me closer to my father. I thought I'd feel his absence too acutely to enjoy myself, but instead his memory only enhanced our days. And most importantly, I have not begun to gain a sense both of finality and continuity. That he is truly gone in a physical sense is at last hitting me, but this has given me a renewed perception of his "spirit," as many would term it. Though I've always been a skeptic in matters both religious and supernatural, I cannot and do not want to deny that my father will always be with me. Perhaps I'll never speak with his ghost or encounter him in heaven, but I *will* always have his memory to help steer me through the rest of my life.

Carleton Essay #2***

I can't even write this essay because I keep thinking about the piano. Now, I wouldn't know a pentatonic from a hole in the wall. I don't play piano. But for about four minutes I bet I could fool you.

I did take lessons when I was a kid, but I was always exceedingly terrible. My own mother admitted later that she was shocked a child as bright as I was could be so backwards. One hour a week for unending months I would sit in the living room on the bench of glowing dark wood, looking at the shining keys, and consistently massacre whatever stripped-down, simplistic piece was in front of me.

I forget quite how it happened, but somehow my mother, my teacher and I can together to put the piano lessons to a merciful end. And yet years and years later, I find myself not writing this essay, because I can't stop thinking about the piano.

I did volunteer for piano, way back when. And I remember exactly why. Such a great deal of *sound* could come from that giant instrument. It was fascinating, irresistible. And it was so rich, both in sound and image. There was something luxurious about the deep wood and contrasting white and black keys that lured me. Opulent words like mahogany, ebony, and ivory belonged to that instrument, whether it was made from such materials or not. And even when the piano stood silent, I could feel the music waiting inside, if you just knew how to bring it out. It was complex, magnificent, larger than life – and that was quite appealing to a very small person.

After the lessons slipped away I forgot about the whole thing for years on end. I think I was the one third-grader who could not play at least half of “Heart and Soul.” But in the summer before my senior year piano notes were echoing in my mind, and I couldn’t make them stop. I was being called, and since I had no mast to which I could tie myself, the only choice was to jump. I dived in to the piano bench – another of the piano’s magical features is that its bench opens up to store sheet music. I toyed with a few folk songs and pop songs, and even had a delicious dig through choral music from the second grade, but eventually I stumbled upon it. The One, my love-at-first-sight. And that’s how I fell head over heels for Johann Pachelbel.

I could never practice when I took lessons, but I’m constantly at it now. My rendition of the Canon in D is getting more complex, and more polished, by the day. In the beginning it took me half an age to painstakingly decipher the black circles and lines, laboriously converting them into notes into fingering into sound. Now I’m getting much faster at interpreting, and just today I got the last line on page three. Pachelbel and I have been together for four months now. I hope my parents don’t mind him.

I’m not quite sure what this love affair is all about. (I’m finding it hard to type because my hands are thinking about how to get from that awkward F-sharp-and-B bit to the part where my fourth finger needs to be on C.) But if I can focus for just a little bit longer, I’ll try to articulate. It’s independence, patience, self-control, learning. It’s something to be engaged in, something to strive for, something to love. I’m fine with my snail’s pace and my complete lack of knowledge – it just doesn’t matter, because I love what I am doing. I love that I can now play the first page seamlessly, even well enough to improvise – change up the fingering, try a new rhythm. I love turning my mind off and making music, and also turning my mind on to search out the meaning of the notes on the page. I love both the journey and the result.

But it’s really eating into my ability to sit down and write an essay.

Essay 3***

How does an agnostic Jew living in the Diaspora connect to Israel? The whole of the summer I spent in Israel was an ongoing exploration of this question, but there was one particular experience that helped me resolve the bundle of internal contradictions the thought provoked inside me.

I was in the Yemin Orde Youth Village, just thirty miles from Israel’s border with Lebanon, on July 16, 2008 when Israel and Hezbollah performed the swap. To Hezbollah: five live militants, including Samir Kantar, and 199 killed guerilla soldiers. To Israel: Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, two soldiers only subsequently known to be dead. The group I was with consisted of thirty-some high school students, two thirds of whom were American and one third of whom were Israeli. All Jews.

I will never forget how over my Israeli breakfast wafted the foreign words of a newscaster gravely reporting the day’s events. Everyone rushed to the TV. Confusion, tears, and angry faces around me reflected on the national hysteria I saw on the screen.

The entire day was one of mourning – an unfortunate introduction into the reality of the Israeli, and probably Lebanese, way of life. The counselors of our group facilitated discussions about the exchange, but what began as a dialogue on the Jewish commandment of Pidyon Shvuyim (redemption of captives) soon devolved into heated outcries, political arguments, and more tears. At one point a friend of mine said ‘what else can we do? We can’t go into Lebanon and kill others to get the bodies back’.

That was the moment when it clicked for me. Though I don't think I'll ever forget the events of the day, what has had a greater impact on me is the conflict within myself that this sparked and for which it has come to embody.

In my head I retorted that that's exactly what 'we' did in the Second Lebanese War. No one wanted to hear that. Myself included.

That I don't support Israel's actions the summer of '06 was followed by equally startling realizations: I don't support the exchange of prisoners we were discussing, I don't support the way the Israeli government treats Israeli Arabs as second class citizens, I don't support the virtual expulsion of Palestinians from Israel in the so called '48 Palestinian Exodus, and I don't support new Israeli settlements in the West Bank. While my political views had far from solidified, this was enough to create an identity crisis.

How can I reconcile my belief in a Jewish nation in the Middle East with my dismay at actions she takes in the region? As a secular Jew, I began the summer program with the troubling dilemma of how I can be Jewish without being religious. This question had now morphed into its political equivalent of how I can be pro-Israel without supporting her on so many issues. If I'm neither religious nor politically supportive of Israel, then what can she possibly mean to me?

While to some extent I've yet to fully unravel this quandary, the events, discussions, and personal convictions that followed the exchange with Hezbollah have allowed me to find partial answers to these cumbersome questions. I disagree with the exchange because it encourages further kidnappings and mistreatment of captured soldiers, increases Arab support for Hezbollah, and returns violent criminals to the streets. At the same time, I can still deeply appreciate, on an emotional level, the return of the soldiers back home to their families. Just as I can disagree with the exchange with Hezbollah, but have this heartfelt bond with those who support it, I can disagree with many of Israel's decisions without disowning the nation as a whole. For me, Israel is far more than a nation with whose actions one agrees or disagrees. It is an idea; a human hope. If I learned anything from my experience that day at Yemin Orde and from my summer travels in Israel, it's that unlike 'nations', which in the Middle East can never be wholly supported for their actions, 'ideas' are universal. It is precisely because I believe so strongly in human hope that I can distinguish between the nation of Israel and the idea for which she lives. It is thus in the concept of a democratic Jewish state that I, an American agnostic, find my connection to Israel.

***All example essays taken from Carleton College Admissions website:

https://apps.carleton.edu/admissions/apply/essay_tips/samples/

About Carleton:

"Founded in 1866, Carleton College is a small, private liberal arts college in the historic river town of Northfield, Minnesota. Best known for its academic excellence and warm, welcoming campus community, Carleton offers 36 majors and 15 concentrations in the arts, humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences." --Carleton Admissions Office blurb