

Sample Essay: With Debate (Type A)

Written for the Common App using the Narrative Structure by a student who did face significant challenges and did know what she wanted to study.

The clock was remarkably slow as I sat, legs tightly crossed, squirming at my desk. “Just raise your hand,” my mind pleaded, “ask.” But despite my urgent need to visit the restroom, I remained seated, begging time to move faster. You see, I was that type of kid to eat French Fries dry because I couldn’t confront the McDonalds cashier for some Heinz packets. I was also the type to sit crying in front of school instead of asking the office if it could check on my late ride. Essentially, I chose to struggle through a problem if the solution involved speaking out against it.

My diffidence was frustrating. My parents relied on me, the only one able to speak English, to guide them, and always anticipated the best from me. However, as calls for help grew, the more defunct I became. I felt that every move I made, it was a gamble between success and failure. For me, the fear of failure and disappointment far outweighed the possibility of triumph, so I took no action and chose to silently suffer under pressure.

Near meltdown, I knew something needed to be done. Mustering up the little courage I had, I sought ways to break out of my shell—without luck. Recreational art classes ended in three boring months. I gave up Self Defense after embarrassing myself in class. After-school band, library volunteering, and book clubs ended similarly. Continued effort yielded nothing.

Disillusioned and wrung dry of ideas, I followed my mom’s advice and joined a debate club. As expected, the club only reaffirmed my self-doubt. Eye contact? Greater volume? No thanks.

But soon, the club moved on from “how to make a speech” lessons to the exploration of argumentation. We were taught to speak the language of Persuasion, and play the game of Debate. Eventually, I fell in love with it all.

By high school, I joined the school debate team, began socializing, and was even elected to head several clubs. I developed critical and analytical thinking skills, and learned how to think and speak spontaneously.

I became proud and confident. Moreover, I became eager to play my role in the family, and family relations strengthened. In fact, nowadays, my parents are interested in my school’s newest gossip.

Four years with debate, and now I’m the kid up at the white board; the kid leading discussions; and the kid standing up for her beliefs. More importantly, I now confront issues instead of avoiding them. It is exciting to discover solutions to problems that affect others, as I was able to do as part of the 1st Place team for the 2010 United Nations Global Debates Program on climate change and poverty. I take a natural interest in global issues, and plan to become a foreign affairs analyst or diplomat by studying international affairs with a focus on national identity.

In particular, I am interested in the North-South Korean tension. What irreconcilable differences have prompted a civilization to separate? Policy implications remain vague, and sovereignty theories have their limits—how do we determine what compromises are to be made? And on a personal level, why did my grandfather have to flee from his destroyed North Korean hometown--and why does it matter? I see a reflection of myself in the divide at the 38th parallel because I see one part isolating itself in defense to outside threats, and another part coming out to face the world as one of the fastest developing nations. Just as my shy persona before debate and extroverted character after debate are both part of who I am, the Korean civilization is also one. And just as my parents expect much from me, the first of my family to attend college, I have grand expectations for this field of study.

Sample Essay: Endodontics (Type B)

Written for the Common App using the Montage Structure by a student who did not face significant challenges and did know what he wanted to study.

As a kid I was always curious. I was unafraid to ask questions and didn't worry how dumb they would make me sound. In second grade I enrolled in a summer science program and built a solar-powered oven that baked real cookies. I remember obsessing over the smallest details: Should I paint the oven black to absorb more heat? What about its shape? A spherical shape would allow for more volume, but would it trap heat as well as conventional rectangular ovens? Even then I was obsessed with the details of design.

And it didn't stop in second grade.

A few years later I designed my first pair of shoes, working for hours to perfect each detail, including whether the laces should be mineral white or diamond white. Even then I sensed that minor differences in tonality could make a huge impact and that different colors could evoke different responses.

In high school I moved on to more advanced projects, teaching myself how to take apart, repair, and customize cell phones. Whether I was adjusting the flex cords that connect the IPS LCD to the iPhone motherboard, or replacing the vibrator motor, I loved discovering the many engineering feats Apple overcame in its efforts to combine form with function.

And once I obtained my driver's license, I began working on cars. Many nights you'll find me in the garage replacing standard chrome trim with an elegant piano black finish or changing the threads on the stitching of the seats to add a personal touch, as I believe a few small changes can transform a generic product into a personalized work of art.

My love of details applies to my schoolwork too.

I'm the math geek who marvels at the fundamental theorems of Calculus, or who sees beauty in $A=(s(s-a)(s-b)(s-c))^{1/2}$. Again, it's in the details: one bracket off or one digit missing and the whole equation collapses. And details are more than details, they can mean the difference between negative and positive infinity, an impossible range of solutions.

I also love sharing this appreciation with others and have taken it upon myself to personally eradicate mathophobia, my Calculus teacher's term for "extreme fear of Math." A small group of other students and I have devoted our after-school time to tutoring our peers in everything from Pre-Algebra to AP Calculus B/C and I believe my fluency in Hebrew and Farsi has helped me connect with some of my school's Israeli and Iranian students. There's nothing better than seeing a student solve a difficult problem without me saying anything.

You probably think I want to be a designer. Or perhaps an engineer?

Wrong. Well, kind of.

Actually, I want to study Endodontics, which is (I'll save you the Wikipedia look-up) a branch of dentistry that deals with the tooth pulp and the tissues surrounding the root of a tooth. As an Endodontist, I'll be working to repair damaged teeth by performing precision root canals and implementing dental crowns. Sound exciting? It is to me.

The fact is, it's not unlike the work I've been doing repairing cellphone circuits and modifying cars, though there is one small difference. In the future I'll still be working to repair machines, but this machine is one of the most sophisticated machines ever created: the human body. Here, my obsession with details will be as crucial as ever. A one millimeter difference can mean the difference between a successful root canal and a lawsuit.

The question is: will the toothbrushes I hand out be mineral white or diamond white?

Sample Essay: Breaking Up With Mom (Type C)

Written for the Common App using the Narrative Structure by a student who did face significant challenges and did not know what she wanted to study

I stare into my cappuccino to try to avoid looking at my teary eyed mom, who had just found a hole in her favorite bright pink floral print scarf.

“I’m your mother, Katyush,” she says in her heavy Russian accent.

A tiny bird of a woman with clipped wings.

I remember white walls, bottles upon bottles of acrylic paint, and a mortgage on a two-bedroom apartment in Lomita, California: my mother’s dream. Together, we unpacked the painting box and started a mural on my new bedroom wall. “Let it Be”, my new wall read, with an array of squares and swirls in every shade of blue imaginable. We proudly took a step back, then unpacked the Jasmine Fancy tea leaves and floral teapot.

Her trembling hands reach for her coffee.

“You’re supposed to take care of me. That’s what family does. I don’t have anyone else.

“Her mom in Moscow, her ex-husband remarried, and her oldest son avoiding her at all costs.

Unemployed and unwilling.

“I’ll get my pills eventually, but family has responsibilities.”

Her depression plummeting, her sanity dwindling, her only lifeline dying for freedom from her confines.

I flash back to the terror in her eyes as she noticed a chip on the teapot’s spout- a spark of fear that transformed into a thunderstorm. How she crumpled in the old kitchen chair across from me. From that moment on, life became a broken record. I walked her to bed, kissed her goodnight, reminded her that I had school the next day. Asleep by 3 am. Late to class. Come home stressed. Start homework. Take care of mom. Finish homework. 3 am.

My mother was in a state of stagnation, and she had a hold on me like quicksand.

Though living with my dad and stepmom was its own ticking timebomb, for the most part I was left alone long enough to do schoolwork and get to class on time-but every moment away from my mom felt like I was tying a noose around her neck. Nothing I did could bring her the peace she wanted from me.

When I was fifteen years old I broke up with my mother. We could still be friends, I told her, but I needed my space, and she couldn’t give me that.

For the first time in my life, I had taken action. I was never again going to passively let life happen to me.

During four long months of separation, I filled the space that my mom previously dominated with learning: everything and anything. I began teaching myself rudimentary French through an online program, learned basic HTML coding and website design, and began editing my drawings on Photoshop so that I could sell them online. When my dad lost his job, I learned to sew my own clothing, and applied my new knowledge to costume design within the Drama department.

On stage, I learned to stand up and say things that mattered. Backstage, I worked with teams of dedicated students who wanted each other to succeed. In our improv group, I gained the confidence to act on my instincts. In the classroom, my Drama teacher emulated the person I wanted to be. She gave me hugs on days that wouldn’t end, insisted that taking care of myself was not the same thing as being selfish, and most importantly, taught me how to ask for help.

A year later, it all culminated in One Bad Apple--a full length musical that I produced with my best friend. Managing the budget, scheduling rehearsals, and working with a cast and crew of students was easily the most difficult thing I have ever done- but it was my choice. The challenge, and the reward, belonged to me.

On my sixteenth birthday, I picked up the phone and dialed my mom. I waited through three agonizingly long pauses between rings.

“Katyush?”

“Hi mom, it’s me.”

Sample Essay: Five Families (Type D)

Written for the Common App using the Montage Structure by a student who did not face challenges and did not know what he wanted to study.

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 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.

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.