

4 Great Essays and Why They Worked

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Just a Moment

Try to find us on these pages of our lives, and I believe we are hard to distinguish.

As Wenda often reminds me, travelling allows us to discover who we really are by giving us the opportunity to blend in and inspire ourselves from imitating the best in other people. Here and there I collect tools that I find useful—rope, candles, an under-water compass, along with open-mindedness, humility, responsibility, drive, and curiosity—and add them to the arsenal I carry along the road in my backpack and in myself.

One evening, after an intense day of travelling in Beijing, walking along the Great Wall and contemplating the remnants of China's glorious history in the blistering cold, a couple of my friends and I decided to end the day by celebrating our western heritage at the nearest McDonald's. The dark cold night had sent the streets' beggars into the warm 24/7 restaurant. The passive look on employees' faces as they cleaned the improvised hotel suggested this happened on a regular basis. People were lying or sleeping on every chair and bench, so we settled on the floor, in the middle of the room. We ordered a few extra burgers, and after a few bites, one by one the beggars woke up and asked us to share. We insisted they join our circle. At first they resisted. As we exposed our broken Chinese, they opened up and challenged us at a game like Yatzee, that required throwing 5 dice around and scoring high multiples. Next some young Western and Chinese kids joined in. The better generation at languages and breaking social barriers, the kids took the game to new dimensions. We ended up spending the night in our sleeping bags on the floor under the disdainful stare of the confused McDonald employees. In the end our American burgers gave us an authentic taste of China.

When an environment becomes too familiar, we change pages. Whether it was wearing the same letters as my American brothers in California, acting the part of a professional fund manager when interviewing the executive board of major corporations, or tutoring Chinese children in English, the Waldo within me adapts,

1 The prompt for this essay was "Where's Waldo?" Difficult prompts like this often trap students to write essays that take place in their head, full of ideas and without actions. The author of this essay overcomes this trap by becoming Waldo.

2 The author identifies one important moment that gives us a Reason To Believe.

3 Notice how the author uses "we" throughout the description of this moment. When you write, try to separate yourself from the group. What did you do? What did you say?

4 It's not about charity; it's about unity. The author isn't an outside observer. He "blends in and inspires himself by imitating the best in other people."

5 Again, we see the author as a unifier. He doesn't need to be an expert in the language to strike up a conversation.

6 Another powerful image that will stick with the reader. We also see that the author is willing to go against the judgments of the employees.

7 After diving deeply into one moment, the author shows us some other "pages" of his life. Showing us a moment first, allows the reader to make sense of the other pieces.

challenges himself and discovers something new about the people around him.

Who knows where life will take me next? I have heard of a particular platform of intellectual and cultural exchange that gathers the most interesting minds from all around the world. The institution is praised for its ability to convey experience and wisdom through round tables of interaction and Socratic rhetoric. I believe it is a place where, as my Chicago family and friends would say, “finding passionate people is easier done than said.” In other words, it is/would be a wonderful page to be on, completely invisible and singular at the same time.

8 Every essay is a conversation. The author shows that he knows the school he is applying to, has done his research, and will be a great fit. This isn't a boiler plate essay being sent to every school on his list.

Romain De Planta (University of Chicago '16)

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With a prompt like, “Where’s Waldo?” it’s very easy to get lost in your ideas. The two biggest mistakes students make writing college essays are staying too general and writing about thoughts rather than actions. The author avoids this by becoming Waldo. This narrative technique allows him to tell the story through his unique perspective and in his authentic voice. The author uses a specific moment to show readers who he is. The night spent at McDonald’s gives the reader Reasons To Believe. We see the author as a compassionate and curious person who brings people together, explores new ideas, and welcomes the opportunity to teach and learn. He uses his fourth paragraph to give the audience the scope of his experiences and the fifth paragraph to make a specific connection to the University of Chicago. However, the heart of his essay is the third paragraph, which takes the reader into a moment and gives powerful details that reveal his character.

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Focus Out

New York City, 9pm. Friends are laughing in the next room squeezed around the dinner table, as I try to whip something up. I put the water to boil, adding salt. As I wait, the steam begins to twist, to twirl, filling up the kitchen. I pause to wipe the sweat from my brow.

At eight o'clock in the morning my shirt is already moist. Sweat rolls down my face, every inch of my body. A typical morning in Perugia.

Sauté the garlic in olive oil on medium heat.

The gravel in the driveway crunches and crackles, "E' arrivato zio Mario!" I run barefoot, almost tripping down the stairs, all the way to his car arms outstretched. His hair, grayer this year, falls over his tanned face.

His hands rest on his belt, one finger cut off above the joint. I pull on my boots and he climbs onto the tractor. He hauls me onto his lap holding me tightly. The tractor roars, an olive branch lightly grazes my face, the grasshoppers go silent. At the back of the field, Mario climbs up a ladder and starts trimming the tips of the branches, the polloni. I take them and pile them in heaps. The trees are brimming with olives this year.

Chop the tomatoes, put them to simmer with the garlic, add salt and pepper.

At noon, I walk back towards the house to find my Nonna in the garden, wearing a flowered apron. She tells me puoi portarmi il cestino un po' più vicino? "bring that bucket a little closer, would you?" She fills it up with plump, juicy, purplish-red tomatoes, a meal in themselves.

Pour in the linguini, stir fresh basil into the tomatoes.

We break off stems of basil. Nonna says, vedi si devono prendere quelli pieni di fiori, così la pianta può crescere. "See we have to take the ones with the most flowers on them, so the plant grows." We climb the small hill with a full bucket of pomodori. It's hot.

1 We are put in a moment with a simple, but effective setting of the scene. The reader wants to know what's going on and doesn't get caught up in any filler or preamble.

2 She gives us the sense of a NYC apartment while conserving her words. Additionally, we get a sense of her relationship with her friends. Just like the room they are very tight.

3 Notice, the author doesn't mention how hard she works, but gives the reader a detail to pull them into the moment.

4 New scene, consistent style, and a great magnet. Why is her shirt moist? What has the author been up to so early in the morning?

5 Weaving these two stories together lets us see two sides of the author.

6 There is clear organization and sense of direction to this essay around the steps of a recipe.

7 She doesn't have to explain the importance of knowing another language, traveling, or family. We get all this from her actions and descriptions.

8 This is the kind of detail that helps set her story apart. It's brings a character to life. We learn that Mario does manual labor. We learn that it might be dangerous work. We want to know how he lost his finger. We see that he doesn't try to hide his injury. We've seen the author's work ethic (sweating to whip up a meal for her friends) and now we see an influence.

Dice the mozzarella, strain the linguini, pour the sauce over them, and add the mozzarella.

I follow Nonna into the kitchen trying to avoid the gang of mothers, uncles and aunts. I reach for the mozzarella and it melts in my mouth; creamy, smooth, dripping, flavor that overloads my senses. I thought I was so clever, but as I turn around “Sarah can you set the table? And stop eating all the mozzarella!” They caught me. I take the tablemats and retreat to the step outside. The neighbor’s cat rubs against my legs. I tear off a small piece of cheese and feed it to her.

Serve right out of the pot. “Hey guys,” I call over their laughter, “help me set the table, dinner is ready!”

Sarah Sutto-Plunz (Smith College ‘17)

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The goal of a college essay is to reveal who you are as a human being. Simple moments, like a spaghetti dinner with friends, can say a lot about a person. This author organizes her essay around the steps of a recipe and shows us two moments from different parts of her life. In doing so, she removes all interpretations and judgments from her writing. She never states a lesson she learned or tells us about her traits. When you tell the reader what to think, they lose the ability to connect with you. Instead, the author presents us with details, dialogue, and descriptions that let the reader get to know her. From stealing bites of mozzarella to dialogue in Italian to the description of her uncle with one finger cut off above the joint, we are given loads of details that set her story apart and make it impossible to forget.

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9 There’s a real sense of authenticity here. Who hasn’t tried to sneak some of grandma’s food?

10 This is where the author shows the biggest restraint. She keeps the story in the moment. There’s no summary or stated lesson. We get a great sense of who the author is as a person, a friend, and a family member.

Keep It Moving

There was a girl and her name was Michael. This girl first picked up a camera when she was seven. It was a point-and-shoot camera, but it was hers. The upgraded camera she got for her 15th birthday was hers also. And so was my book. One summer she was in Florida. Her hair was dripping from the pool water, her skin shimmered in the blazing sunlight, and her eyes squinted at her stack of books. She picked the smallest of the bunch; she picked mine. The one labeled "Hawthorne." It only had one story and she read it quickly. "Hm," she said as she finished the first time. She said, "What?" when she finished the second time, and at the third ending she raised her sunglasses over her head and squinted at the sun. "Beautiful," she murmured. She grabbed a pencil and wrote, "There is no absolute beauty. There is only what you make of it" on the last page of my story.

Back home she was entering another photo contest. This one had a theme of beauty. She booked the studio for two hours and brought in her friend. Her friend had high cheek bones, emerald eyes, curly red hair, and lips that sat outward. She was short but had the body of a dancer. When she moved everyone watched, mouths slightly ajar. Her muscles flexed and released with ease. Michael placed the girl in a wooden chair, turned her face upward toward the enormous lights and took a photo of every angle she could possibly get. She switched from black and white to high resolution, back to black and white. When the photos developed she never picked the winning shot for herself. "This is the one," said her teacher.

"Wow, you don't need to take any more pictures, Michael, this is it," said her peers.

Michael went home that night and gazed at the photo. Her brow wrinkled and eyes narrowed. She put the photo in her drawer and went to sleep. The next day Michael set out with her most basic camera, the one that is always on her person. She's walking up 34th street and sees a woman. This woman had dirty skin and dirty clothes. Her blackened fingers held a sign that said, "I'm hungry." Her eyes were vacant, and she looked to the side. Her eyes were trained in that direction and never

1 Magnet. So many interesting things going on in this simple start. The tense catches the reader off guard, as does the surprise of girl being named Michael. We want to find out who this person is.

2 This student is telling her story from the perspective of a famous author. Who is this author?

3 She is writing an essay about an influence, but instead of telling the audience what the book meant to her, she shows us her reaction each time she reads through the book. We hear her words and see her perspective change.

4 She doesn't say her friend was pretty. The author provides sensory details to let us see exactly what her friend looks like.

5 We see how the author is pressured to choose the winning shot by hearing the exact words spoken. Many students would just talk about the experience of peer pressure.

6 She could have said "I was thinking..." but allows the moment to speak for itself.

7 This is a great example of Focus Out. The author never calls the woman homeless. Instead, she brings us into her moment and lets us see through her unique perspective.

moved. Michael took out her camera and took a quick picture, just one. She went to develop it that same day and put it in a folder to take home. On her bed, cross-legged, she sat looking at the red-haired girl. Her eyes cast upward, her cheek bones highlighted; Michael's mom gazed at the picture and said, "That should be in Vogue."

Michael pulled out the other picture, of the hungry woman and placed it next to the other. Her eyes widened as she saw how the light created a shadow over the woman's face. There was no dirt, just an eye looking away. "Now that," her mother said, "shouldn't be. Easy choice, huh?"

"Yes, it is," Michael said. She placed her finger over the shadow and tapped the photo four times. She smiled. She folded the color image in half and put it in her drawer; she placed the photo of the woman in a protective folder and placed it in her bag. As she laid down that night she smirked into the glow of the TV. She said, "There is no beauty. There is only what we make of it," and closed her eyes.

Michael Sheffey (Howard University '16)

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Great college essays draw you in from the beginning, take you on a clear journey, and make you want more at the end. We call this structure Magnet, Pivot, and Glow. It keeps readers engaged by ensuring a strong sense of purpose and direction throughout the essay. The Magnet of this essay is simple, but effective. The tense catches the reader off guard, as does the surprise of a girl being named Michael. We want to find out who this person is. The Pivot is the point where the author needs to make a choice that will reveal her character. She has two photographs to decide between and is being heavily pressured to choose the one that represents conventional ideas of beauty. The Glow stays in the moment and ends with action. We hear her voice. It answers the question in the beginning: who is this girl named Michael. Now, we have a Reason To Believe in her. She is a strong woman who will make her own decisions and stand up for what she believes in. The influence of Hawthorne is clear and there is no need for a summary or a lesson learned.
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8 Pivot. This is a clear point in the story where the author needs to make a choice. That choice will reveal her character. The Magnet, Pivot, Glow structure keeps the reader engaged.

9 Glow. We see her choice. She stays in the moment and ends with action. We hear her voice. It answers the question in the beginning; who is this girl named Michael? She is someone who will make her own decisions, go against the norm, and resist peer pressure. She values unconventional beauty. We see the affect of Hawthorne as influence. There is no need for a summary or a lesson learned.

Reason To Believe

“Vote Paul Lee for District Leader!” My face brightened as morning commuters passed by and took flyers from my hand. As they turned the corner, they carelessly tossed the flyers away. My brows furrowed. Is this what I woke up at seven in the morning for? To hand out flyers to indifferent strangers who won’t give the time of day, nevertheless a second glance? I was just a background character, a boy handing out flyers in the scene of a lively street. I was a mannequin, easily passed by unnoticed.

After my flyer shift had ended, my boss took me out to lunch at a diner. My eyes were darting back and forth, unsure of the situation. My boss slouched casually in his seat across from me. I had only met him twice before and instinctively, I began surreptitiously examining him. I slyly lowered my menu and peered over the “wall.” He wore a simple white polo shirt and his greying hair was brushed back in an old 60s hairstyle. He seemed like just an average Chinese man. The waiter came and pulled me out of my idle thoughts. As we made our orders, he put down his menu, and said, “how about a story?”

He opened with a story about his stint with the army, when he brashly enlisted at the Chinatown recruitment center. Next was a lighthearted tale of his moment of “stardom” when he debuted on the silver screen in Hollywood. Finally, the curtains closed with a story of an “extreme makeover” of his parents’ antique store to a game shop.

I vicariously experienced the vivid fragments of his past through his stories. I felt the hope and energy of a young man slightly short in stature, but big in heart, enlisting in the army, the excitement of a risk taker trying to make it big in Hollywood, and the freedom of a high spirited man who followed his hobby and turned his parents’ antique store to a game shop.

In my mind Paul Lee had transcended the typical mannequin of an average Chinese man. I had inadvertently made the same oversight as the people that passed me on

1 Starting the story with dialogue is an immediate way to grab readers’ attention. We get a sense of the author’s enthusiasm and initiative from the start.

2 The author is in Chinatown in New York City, but there is nothing that lets the reader distinguish the “lively streets” he refers to from any other city. There is room for some authentic details to set his story apart.

3 The detail of “eyes shifting” trying to assess the situation shows Kenny as analytical and anxious.

4 The idea of a menu as a “wall” is a really natural metaphor that shows how meeting someone new can be intimidating.

5 We see the author as observant, curious, and a little judgmental. He paints a picture without using a thesaurus.

6 This little bit of dialogue really creates a sense of curiosity. What is Paul Lee’s story? Who says something like that? It’s totally authentic and makes us want to learn more.

7 The author chooses to summarize Paul Lee’s stories, which in this case is a great strategy. He gives us enough detail to understand Paul Lee as an influence, but focuses on his own actions.

8 What is an average Chinese man? Here is an opportunity to Focus Out.

the street. I fit him into a general mold without trying to see him as an individual, just as they did to me. Looking around me, I had been blind. Every person in the room had their own unique story and character just like Paul had his, and I had mine.

Upon my realization, I found the courage to convey my own unique character to Paul through my ideas. There is a balance between practicality, creativity, and fun that I have come to hold at the highest value in my life. I proposed to Paul an idea that was the embodiment of all three: to host carnival games at the Pavilion with a voter registration stand on the side. Instead of discarding my idea as I had expected, Paul encouraged it. Throughout the next week, the volunteers worked to create flyers, brainstorm ideas for games, and gather prizes. However, on the day it all came together, it rained. Discouraged, I looked to Paul only to see that he was still in high spirits. In that moment I knew I couldn't be the same defeated, overlooked mannequin handing out flyers in the street. Optimism and vitality surged through the mannequin within me. I wiped the scowl from my face and proudly presented to him the six registration forms we received that day with a smile. The mannequin had come to life; I was no longer a background character but the center of the scene.

Kenny Lee (Cornell University '17)

Remember, regardless of the prompt the essay is about you. The essays let colleges know what they will be missing if they don't admit you. In essays about influences students sometimes make a stronger case for the person who has influenced them than for themselves. This author avoids this common mistake. From the start of the essay the author shows us his initiative and enthusiasm as we hear his voice campaigning, "Vote Paul Lee for District Leader!" The author of this essay gives us enough detail to understand how Mr. Lee has influenced him, but focuses the essay on his own actions. He takes a unique approach to voter registration, setting up carnival games to attract registrants. Through his actions we see a fun-loving, creative problem solver with attention to detail and perseverance. We understand his influence and have a strong Reason To Believe in him.

9 Even though this is a script (something anyone could say) it seems authentic and reflective. Now we need to see it in action.

10 We see his influence. We see what he values. Most importantly we actually see him put it to action.

11 Again we see the author's actions. He's someone who will bring optimism and energy to a community, celebrate small accomplishments, and motivate others.