



# SAMPLE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAYS



Brenda Bernstein, an expert writer and editor, holds an English degree from Yale (*magna cum laude*) and a J.D. from the NYU School of Law (*cum laude*). She has been coaching college, law school, medical school and business school applicants on their essays for over 12 years.

**Janitor** – p. 1

**Capture** – p. 2

**Bicycle** – p. 3

**Escher** – p. 4

**Experiment** – p. 5

**Mango Yogurt** – p. 6

Note: All essays meet the 500-word limit for the Common Application essay.

***“I couldn’t have gotten in without you.”***

*- Joseph S., admitted early decision  
to Northwestern*



## Janitor

On the first day of my new job, I stared up at the school building with apprehension. It was time for me to enter the work force, as my mother was having a hard time making ends meet between her Social Security checks and part-time job. I had always felt that anything would be better than working fast food, but now I was beginning to wonder.

Inside, my new co-workers awaited me. I had seen them around my school for years, but had never given them much thought. Now I was going to be one of them. I was greeted by my supervisor, a stocky man with a mullet who introduced himself as Brian and immediately began telling me about the ins and outs of my new job. We headed toward the gym, where we would be cleaning the locker rooms. As soon as I saw the toilets, my heart sank, for I was sure that soon I would be bent over them, scrubbing away at weeks of unmentionable filth. He flashed a grin. "That's ok, I'll get the toilets, you can mop the floor." Maybe this job wouldn't be so bad after all.

My fellow custodians, Brian, Diane and Smitty, quickly brought me into their fold, showing me all the "tricks of the trade," and even opening up their lives to me. Although he never complains, Brian puts in at least sixty hours per week and spends weekends doing odd jobs to support a wife, four daughters and an ailing mother-in-law. And Diane wakes up at four-o'clock every morning to take her two daughters to daycare and get to work by 6:30am.

One day Diane and I were waxing a floor when I unwittingly asked her about the father of her children. With a pained expression she said, "He became addicted to cocaine and committed suicide." I later met her daughters and was amazed by the way this family had been able to overcome loss to become the model of a loving, caring family. I felt privileged to learn the most intimate details of this woman's life, a woman whom – I am now ashamed to admit – I had ignored a few months before.

When I had been working at the school for about three months, I was on my way to clock in when two boys stopped me in the hall. "Hey man, do you skateboard?" one of them asked. Before I could say anything the other interrupted, "Of course he doesn't – he's just a janitor."

I kept the answer to myself, and as I walked away to begin yet another day as a janitor, I couldn't help but smile. I realized how easy it is to become the object of someone else's judgments. But I didn't mind. I knew that my fellow custodians and I were much more than just janitors; we are real people with real lives, sometimes with very touching stories to tell. And some of us even keep a skateboard in the mop closet.

## Capture

While I'm trying to slow down and capture, everyone around me is trying to speed up and forget. Whether I'm being knocked off balance while crouching in a crowded street or my light meter reminds me that skyscrapers are eclipsing vital sunlight, it's all challenging. Even if I'm not in a hurry, I feel like I should be.

After my attempts to arrest beauty in a city that eats dawdlers for breakfast, I return to school to develop my film. As I take up a pair of tongs, slip my paper into the chemicals and watch as pictures unfolds, I am reminded why I go through all the trouble. Part of my satisfaction is that the photograph is a product of my imagination, my intellect, my technique. But perhaps even more important is that snapping pictures allows me to paralyze time, document my surroundings and revisit moments in a visual, vibrant way.

As an adopted child with ambiguity in my personal history, I don't have the primary sources that would give me a picture of what it was like to be there with my biological mom. I grew up with no records or information from the first five months of my life and thus, a gaping hole in my understanding of where I came from. When I was ten, after seeing my best friend Chloe's elaborate pink and white polka-dotted baby book, I came home crying to my adoptive mom. Because I lack documentation from my infancy, I felt and still feel like my past is a lockbox. I think I was the only one in the 5th grade who didn't know the basics of their birth: weight, height, length of labor, etc.

It was not until three months ago, at age seventeen, that I was given the most revealing documents of my life: the hospital records of my birth. On those papers, I saw my old name for the first time, scribbled nearly illegibly at the top of each photocopied page: Chelsea Saire McKelvey. I read: "father not present, rashes on head and arms, mother is 19 and quit waitressing job to raise baby girl, mother took LSD twice, child cries very little and mother and child live in an apartment with 3 cats." This stapled packet of official reports is my version of a baby book. It is because of these primary documents that I am able to piece together some vague idea of what I was like before being placed into foster care an eventually being adopted.

Those moments with my biological mother are lost, but now I take photographs everywhere I go because I know, at least, this moment won't be lost. Most people have pictures of their parents and grandparents holding them in the hospital room, fresh from the womb—or of sleeping in their crib for the first time. I can't change things and I'll never have what non-adopted people have ... but I can capture my reality now ... to document for later.

## Bicycle

I scrutinized the decrepit bicycle that I had just hauled out of the basement. Brushing back the cobwebs covering its frame, it suddenly hit me: In a different time and place, my father had thrust this same bike upon me for tutelage into its mysterious laws of motion. “I’m ready now Daniel,” my younger sister Emma determinedly announced, interrupting my reverie. Fully equipped with helmet and elbow pads, Emma awaited her first day of bicycle riding 101. I stepped up as a reluctant “teacher,” not knowing that in the end, I myself would learn a valuable lesson about life from my sister.

A week passed and Emma was having trouble. She would sit on the bike by herself only if the kick stand were down, and she refused to pedal if I were not holding on to her shoulders. Every day I reiterated the basic concept behind balancing, but Emma had not gained much confidence. I was growing frustrated. My own learning experience had been one of almost instant comprehension and enjoyment. Why could my sister not clear this basic hurdle?

Then one day my sister almost fell off the bike, and my eyes abruptly opened to the realities of her situation. First, I realized that despite her own terror, and despite the real possibility that she could be injured, she still had been insisting on dragging me out every day for practice. I also realized that I had been anticipating erroneously that she would learn to ride the same way I had.

Once I accepted my sister’s different learning style and noticed how brave and motivated she was, I started to approach the situation differently. I began to offer my encouragement and praise and stopped expecting my sister to be like me. I still pushed, coaxed, and pleaded with her to try and pedal and step outside of her comfort zone, but I didn’t *demand* progress. The method worked, and each day led to gradual improvements in her confidence and ability.

One day, I was walking behind the bike holding onto her shoulders and whispering words of support when it happened. Emma suddenly shot ahead of me and was out of my grasp; she had taken off down the street by herself! As I watched her pedal up and down the block for the rest of the spring and into the summer, I realized we had each gained something: Emma a useful method of transportation and a big brother who was very proud of her; and me a more intricate understanding of people and the education process.

My parents had always said that patience was a virtue and I had heard the saying that Rome wasn’t built in a day, but I had always looked at those themes abstractly. Now I know first-hand that whether it is the process of learning or teaching, persistent and patient effort is what leads to high-quality results. My sister taught me this lesson, and I will never forget it.

## Escher

I unwrapped the delicately crinkled foil and removed the dried pink roses that had been carefully attached to the wrapping. Inside I found a book: The Magic of M.C. Escher. That night, I looked through the book five times. And that was just the beginning.

Initially, I was drawn in by the sheer coolness of Escher's graphics; his wild imagination and intimate detail revealed a type of art I had never experienced before. As I delved deeper, I discovered a fascinating exploration of consistency. He sometimes embraces consistency and sometimes deliberately rejects it, but in both cases he creatively expresses what is really inside of him. I am always trying to figure out the best ways to create things; through Escher I saw new ways of doing this.

The aspect of consistency that Escher explores most noticeably is repetition. Repetition to me can feel boring, as if I'm in a rut. But Escher doesn't use repetition to be redundant but to create something new—he will repeat a pattern over and over until eventually, there is a slight diversion and something different leaps forth. In one of his drawings, the rocky coastline of a perfect little town graphically transforms, through many stages of repetition, into a small smiling Asian man.

I have grasped onto and used this concept in my own work, especially in my poetry. When I write I sometimes keep picking at the same ideas and words until they finally mold into a self-expression. I will not settle for something that does not flow right, that does not hit the spot exactly as I intended. There is no reason to compromise—I just have to keep working, sometimes repeating, until at last I break from what is patterned and comfortable.

Escher also explores consistency by creating "impossible" drawings—two very different theories or concepts that coexist in the same piece. In certain works, such as one of water flowing up, all the parts are not consistent with one another but they come together to create something complex and beautiful.

Escher's paradoxes are comparable to certain inevitable inconsistencies in life. For instance, my friends and family are more important than anything else to me but I want to spend the next four years across the country from them. Contradictions like this will always exist and I know the only way to live with them is to embrace them as much as possible, or, as Escher did, simply allow them to be a piece of art.

I have now looked through my Escher book so many times that I have memorized the order of the drawings; his artwork covers the walls of my room. The artwork that originally fascinated me by its complexity and precision has inspired me to work at things I am passionate about, even if it means doing the same thing over and over. It has taught me to embrace inconsistencies. And it has fueled my own creative process in ways that I never would have imagined.

## Experiment

It was quite a scene. The floors, walls and ceiling were all spattered with a foamy, sour-smelling residue. I had just been trying to do an experiment I had seen on TV, and it had gone awry. My mother walked into the room and exclaimed in horror, "What in the world have you done now?" My desire to discover had transformed my kitchen much in the same way it has transformed the way I view the world.

From a young age I've always wanted to experiment and discover new things. Most children love shows like Sesame Street and Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, and though I was no exception, I have always loved The Discovery Channel more. It was probably the images of big trucks and space ships that brought me in as a young child, but over time I have grown to enjoy the great amount of information I can glean from its programs.

At twelve, I discovered Bill Nye the Science Guy. I was delighted at all I could learn on his show, and I was in love with all the experiments you could do at home. Although my mother had to endure quite a few messes due to my inquisitive nature, she was not disappointed when I signed up for our middle school's science team. I have continued on the science team all the way through high school and my team made it to the state finals. Not only had Bill Nye helped me to pursue this one academic avenue, but the interest he sparked in me has made me look at the world differently. Now, when I look at a tree or a sunset I can't help but think about all the complex and delicate processes that make them what they are.

About four years ago I started watching The FBI Files, a show about forensic science, on none other than The Discovery Channel. The show inspired me to pursue forensics further. I checked out a few books, and as I began to read, forensic psychology began to interest me. I delved further into this subject and found that I am very interested in psychology in general. As I've read more and learned more I've begun to look at people differently. I observe my friends and dissect their lives and actions to find out what events have shaped them into the people they are today.

Last year my mother gave me two books to read: Sophie's World, about the history of philosophy, and A Brief History of Time, about the history and fundamentals of physics. The more I read the more engaged I became. These two books have made me think long and hard about the very makeup of our universe and the basis of our existence.

Not a day goes by that I am not confounded by new questions. I hope that I can use my love of learning and experimentation to discover the answers to some of them.

## Mango Yogurt

Chunks of mango yogurt dripped from my hair and slid down my face, mingling with tears generated from the sort of laughing that leaves your cheeks burning and your stomach aching. "Barbie! I can't believe you did that!" I sputtered. "I don't know what happened! The wind... it just caught my spoon!" Had Barbie, a 68 year-old woman, seriously just thrown yogurt at me?

This behavior was completely foreign to me. Up until now, my experiences with the elderly had been noticeably lacking in spontaneous fun. My biological paternal grandmother is a somber lady who dislikes uncertain circumstances while my grandfather, who was the captain of a warship in the British Navy during WWII, possesses a strong sense of adventure but little warmth or playfulness. I certainly have never had a food fight with either of them.

In my conversations with my grandmother, I have always felt discouraged. I used to tell her of my fantastic traveling experiences, like spontaneously jumping into the water at an English beach in February, or biking with friends through the Belgian countryside. She never failed to bring up the dangerous aspects of my explorations, warning "It's not safe to swim in water that cold," or "You should never travel in a country where you don't speak the language," or, simply, "It's just too dangerous." The constant condemnation of my sense of adventure stifled me.

Unlike my grandmother, for whom adventure was taboo, my grandfather expected it of me. To connect with him, I had to prove that his outgoing, risk-taking English blood ran through my veins. I knew the surest way to gain his acceptance was to swim through the freezing ocean water of the Window Cave, a black tunnel passing through 60 feet of solid rock. This rite of passage, one performed by every member of my English family for over 50 years, had always terrified me. But the anticipation of my grandfather sweeping me off my feet in an emotional, congratulatory hug allowed me to conquer my fears. I swam through it, coming out on the other side wet and smiling. However, there was no hug. No show of emotion, only a slight nod to show his approval. My heart broke as it became apparent that I never would receive from him the display of emotion I so craved.

And now, here I was having a yogurt fight with Barbie. With her, my adopted grandmother, I formed the bond that had been missing with my biological grandparents. I can laugh and cry with her. I can let my spontaneous nature bubble over, uninhibited by restraint or fear of judgment. It was in that yogurt-covered moment as I caught Barbie's eyes, a glint of playful wickedness dancing about them as she loaded her spoon with more ammo, that I knew I had created a bond for life. Grabbing my yogurt pot in my left hand, my spoon in my right, a grin erupted across my mango-spattered face. I was ready. Game on!