

Your College Essay Matters

Your essay reveals something important about you that your transcript and application cannot- your personality. Showcase your writing skills and give the admissions officer a sense of who you are by following these tips and examples.

Find a Creative Angle: In the essay example below, the

applicant transforms her bookshelf into a metaphor for her life. This essay is creative and demonstrates the applicant's love of reading and learning. You get a great sense of who she is and what she will add to the intellectual community at her chosen school. What would be the metaphor for your life?

Shelves One Through Five—Neha

Pushed against the left wall in my room is a curious piece of furniture. Initially, it was a six foot tall and three foot wide red oak bookcase. Strangely, as the five shelves began to fill with books, the dimensions of the bookcase slowly evolved into a looking glass. Now, years later, my reflection is almost complete: each bookshelf cradles the stories of my life.

Shelf One is the base, and rightfully so. It contains my building blocks. Among the bright covers and large lettered titles lie countless fairy tales, fables, and legends. My Indian heritage mixes with my American lifestyle as the spines interchange from gifts from my father's father to Barnes and Noble bought, creating a cocktail of the morals I grew up on. The heroes in my childhood storybooks were my teachers, driving me to my own heroic actions of enthusiastic community service, whether it was volunteering at the Parks and Recreation center or serving at the Special Olympics.

As I grew out of the innocence of *Aesop's Fables*, I developed a ravenous hunger for words. I wanted to read as much as I could, absorbing each book that chanced my way. Shelves Two and Three sag with the weight of the dialogues that satiated my hunger. Everything ranging from the science fiction of *A Wrinkle in Time* to the ridiculous amusement of *The Big Friendly Giant* to

the horrors of *Columbine* gathers in those shelves. Here is the embodiment of my curiosity and thirst for knowledge. Here is the explanation for my desire to do more, learn more, and see more. My parents aided these passions, constantly introducing me to new cultures and new places. Our travels all over the country and the world taught me the importance of adaptability and an open mind. With these characteristics, I am always able to communicate to whomever I speak to, regardless of their language or culture.

Shelf Four is the stinging slap I received from reality in my early teens. No longer could I spend all my time trying out the delicious foods at this new restaurant or learning from the displays at the rare exhibit. Now my weekends were filled with daunting math textbooks, designed to help me conquer the beast of numbers. While Shelf Four holds the memories of slogging through countless hours of math, it also displays my development of a logical and rational mind. This is where I grew the qualities of being a strong leader. Now, well versed in the feeling of failure, I am also educated in perseverance and success. I use these experiences to help those who come my way. I am able to connect with others easily because I am willing to share the trials I have faced, and the knowledge I have gained from them.

Looking to the very top, Shelf Five waits patiently. It is partially filled with an assortment of articles from *The Economist*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*, all of which highlight my love for the political sciences, fostered by the debate team. Alongside those, stacked neatly, are aerospace engineering papers, about plasma propulsion, pork chop plots, and Hohmann transfers. They feature my fascinations with physical science and innovation for the future. Countless college brochures, scribbled on with notes and reminders, complete the first half of this top shelf, and they are the present.

Now, standing in the front of a bookcase, I find that I am completely content. I can see myself with a simple, yet comprehensive clarity, like staring into a mirror. Though Shelf Five is unfinished, it is no less hopeful or less promising than the previous four. Soon, I will fill this shelf with the ideas that will further define who I am. I will look upon this shelf in the future with a sense of wholeness, because I know that this bookshelf is me.

Choose a Topic

That Will

Highlight You.

College admissions officers read thousands and thousands of essays. If you want to avoid being yet another essay listing extra-curricular activities or the amount of dedication it takes to do well in college, take a different approach by highlighting information that isn't covered in your application. Kyla's essay not only shares a personal story, but highlights her ability to think critically and expresses her passion for service.

Community Service Isn't For Me—Kyla

I've recently come to the realization that community service just isn't for me. Now before you start making assumptions, keep reading.

In September of my sophomore year I joined a club called buildOn that focuses on breaking the cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and low expectations through service and education. Little did I know, just twenty-two months and \$57,794 of fundraising later, I'd be headed on a plane to the Kasungu District of Malawi to break ground on the construction site of a second village's first school!

The experiences of immersing myself in the Malawian communities—of sharing the same straw-thatched, mud-brick homes of host families, of learning bits and pieces of the Chichewa language, of exploring the dynamics of multi-

chief, polygamous villages—have been the most enriching aspects of my education to date. I may have traveled a world away, but by the time I left, I was no longer an outsider. To see my eight-year-old host sister, Esther, thirst for knowledge as she meticulously traced letters of the alphabet into the sandy floor of her Standard-Two schoolroom, makes me wonder what stories she'll tell when she finally gets the chance to put pen to paper. To know my host mother, my amai, will no longer have to tie strips of fabric onto public buses to know which ones to take home from the market because she'll be able to read their destinations herself, reassures me the adult literacy program is empowering women to be self-sufficient. These memories, though seemingly not monumental, drive me to go the extra mile now that I'm home. They fuel my passion for the case I'm investing in, legitimizing the work that I do.

On trek, I have the ability to directly impact the communities in which we build. I strive relentlessly to confront the stereotypes of gender roles and female inferiority, volunteering to work beside men in the trenches of the foundation, though it's traditionally seen as a male-only job. Furthermore, buildOn's arrival places a spotlight on the village, giving impetus for the people to highlight their needs in front of an audience of district legislators and international agencies. Our presence speaks to the idea that the people have a voice, and more importantly, their voice is being heard. This attention is a catalyst for change, inspiring the villagers to become assertive in their quest for aid in a way that giving a check never could.

That being said, as well-intentioned as I may have been in committing to Trek, I also acknowledge that every one of the aforementioned factors is a priority of my own doing. The people of Malawi asked for a school, not a student. I'm not a professional architect or builder. I don't profess to being a "superior" individual. As charming of a companion as I can be, it isn't my presence in these villages that changes the peoples' lives. *So why, I ask myself, did I incur the expenses to fly myself to Malawi for this endeavor instead of donating that money to hire skilled laborers in my place?*

It seems there comes a time, in all our lives, when we find ourselves stopped at the crossroads. Sublimation meets moral obligation, and taunted are we as we weight them head-to-head. For two years now, the NCHS chapter of buildOn has accomplished many great things. But did we do the *right* thing? I think about it in the context of philanthropy overall: when is giving money better than giving time? Who benefits when I arrive as an unskilled laborer in a village? How do you measure positive contributions, and from whose perspective? I'm still wrestling with these questions as I strive to strike the right balance between making a contribution and raising awareness while maximizing the ultimate benefit to the recipients. Truly, community service isn't for me, it's for Esther and Amai and all the others I seek to serve.

Returning to Peru—Anna

Returning to Peru to visit my father's homeland, I was disturbed by the significant pollution, land degradation, unsustainable practices, and lack of clean water surrounding me. The memory of a destitute boy, surrounded by waste, consuming water from a filthy communal tap in a dilapidated shantytown of Lima, Peru still haunts me.

Exploration drives discovery. This pivotal experience formulated my passion and career objective: preserving the environment and protecting our resources.

Since my discovery, I have never stopped preparing for a future in environmental engineering. I've immersed myself in rigorous classes of environmental science, chemistry, biology, math, physics, and geology. I have organized a "Walk for Water" to raise awareness of water conservation, worked extensively with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and Youth Ocean Conservation Summit, and even received my first grant for a project designed to install a green roof, rain barrels, and a rain garden at my school. For billions of years, Earth's structure and composition has developed to maintain a balance of order for the prosperity of life.

Unfortunately, humans have not returned the favor. Instead, we have created unprecedented amounts of habitat destruction, resource depletion, toxic waste, and water insecurity.

Environmental engineering is the integration of science and engineering principles to develop solutions to these eminent and future crises. I want to collaborate with the top school of public health to address the risks of contaminated water, and develop efficient ways to conserve and purify water resources globally while preserving major ecosystems. I want to end land degradation in endangered and vulnerable biomes such as my father's homeland. I want to create alternatives to produce clean energy. I want to reduce the ecological footprint left by our species.

Keep in focus. This is your chance to tell admission officers exactly why they should admit you. Unfortunately, some students try to list every single reason, their academic record, their athletic expertise, and community service, all in a page or two. Pick a theme and stick to it. In the next example, the applicant does a great job of providing background on her interest in environmental engineering and why she has chosen to pursue it as an undergraduate degree at her chosen school.

The Hopkins Overnight Multicultural Experience allowed me to appreciate the spirit of exploration and discovery that radiates from students and teachers, and still from my parents who met during their doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins. Hopkins students don't submit themselves to demanding internships or research due to requirement; they yearn from a deeper understanding of what is at hand. That is who I am: self-driven and determined to go beyond what is necessary. I loved immersing myself in a culturally diverse environment, interacting with passionate individuals, and being constantly stimulated by new ideas. I want to be deeply connected with my original work, knowing that I will make a difference in the world yet still be able to absorb streaming information around me throughout my life.

Naturally, I will always continue my love for music, soccer, art, and the outdoors. My passion for the environment serves as my roots, connecting me to the very earth which "nutured" me. My interests continue to anchor my identity, while branches grow of ambition and curiosity. Exploration and discovery flower as the fruit of my tree, as I strive to reveal as much as possible about not only myself, but the world we inhabit. I remain intrigued by the ongoing stream of what is already known, and what remains to be exposed.

Couple Things to Keep in Mind:

- Answer the Question
- Brainstorming Helps
- Proofread
- Get Feedback from Family, Friends, and Teachers

We've Heard it all Before: (essay topics to stay away from)

- Winning or losing the big game
- The death of a pet
- Religion
- Friendship problems
- Simple solutions to world problems
- Parent-bashing

This information and more helpful tips can be found on these websites: [Bigfuture by The College Board](#), [Essays That Worked](#)