

Section B – Short Essay Response Examples

The examples below are from actual applications. While they discuss different activities, their relative tones – and the impact of them – are apparent.

Example 1: Overly Humble

“Select your favorite service activity, and describe why it is important to you and your community.”

“Helped assist in running, or “helped run?” The second option is stronger and likely still accurate.

One sentence about the program’s impact is good – she should then use the second sentence to state how her impact allows the program to be even more effective.

Of course it is!

My favorite service activity is the volunteer work I do at an after school enrichment program at the elementary school. For a few years, I have helped assist the volunteer coordinator of our school in running the program by completing a number of tasks. I assist in designing lesson plans and games, and welcome new students. I love this volunteer work because of the enormous difference the program makes in the lives of the students. The program helps kindergarteners and low-income students meet friends and develop self-confidence. Although the work I do isn’t that important, an official “Find a Friend Program” has been made, whose purpose is to make sure that all students are paired with a buddy if they just go to a spot on the playground that’s painted on the ground with “I could use a friend” printed around the colored circle. A few of the less popular students have been welcomed into the class, and I hope they feel a sense confidence that will follow them wherever they go.

In talking with the student we learned that she **DESIGNED** them independently from start to finish. “Assist in designing” is not nearly as strong – or accurate – as “design.”

Did this student create the “Find a Friend Program?” Passive voice can often indicate that a student has left her role out. Who made the program? How did it just “get made?”

In general, this description focuses more on the other students than the applicant’s role, which is fine so long as the applicant’s contributions aren’t totally hidden as a result. Give us some personal pronouns (I, me, my) and action verbs (ran, started, supported) that convey the scope and impact of your involvement.

Example 2: Overly Proud/Arrogant

“Describe a specific situation or activity in which you made a difference in the lives of others through your effectiveness as a leader.”

As I stood on the podium, my defeated competitors clapping for me, my parents smiling, I knew that I had achieved my dream. I had won the KLC Cup.

Last year, my tennis doubles team won the regional championship and earned a spot at the KLC Cup state tournament. Although my

Uck! Striking “my defeated competitors clapping for me” would convey the same accomplishment without the insensitivity and poor sportsmanship.

This sentence construction implies that the applicant doesn't think he's his partner's equal (i.e. he's better).

Do you hear the attitude? Translation: "I made an understandable minor mistake, but due to the my partner's complete incompetence, we lost."

Another phrase that paints this applicant as a know-it-all.

partner and I had always been treated as equals, in our last practice before the tournament, the training manager announced that I should lead the team as captain. He informed me that I was the powerhouse player for the club, and that with great power, comes great responsibility. I was going to have to encourage my doubles partner, as well as all the other teams, even though I knew they were going to lose. — At first, the tournament did not go according to plan. Due to a number of mistakes by my partner and a missed serve on my part, we lost our first match to an inferior team. My whole training club was discouraged, and I was too, but I managed to carry us through. In the next match, I stepped out on the court determined to win, and I did. All the other teams we knocked out in the first round like I predicted, but I had to win to give them hope. And win I did.

What?! That's not very encouraging. How does he know they were going to lose? Saying "even though we were facing stronger teams" or "had poor records" is less charged

A "lower-ranked" team is factual. "Inferior" is judgmental.

How? Generalizations tend to be breeding grounds for overstatement.

My partner and I finished tournament in first place, and I was tournament MVP. Even though the other teams weren't at the same caliber, they at least were awarded the sportsmanship award to feel better about themselves. Marching up to the stage to receive the KLC Cup, I knew I had led my team to victory.

And we bet he never let them forget it.

Ouch! Simply unnecessary.

Example 3: Straightforward/Factual

"Pick one thing you really enjoy and tell us why you love it."

This comment could appear arrogant in a different context, but here the student owns her skill, and then follows it up with other lines that show her humility and thoughtfulness.

Standing in front of crowd, slight butterflies in my stomach, microphone in hand or not, I'm ready. I love speaking in front of people, and have won a number of awards for talking about what's important to me and serving as a voice for others. I've always had a knack for being able to articulate my thoughts and opinions in an eloquent way when in front of crowd. Whether I am in front of my peers, supporters of my cause, or the opposition, I love presenting my case. When I am speaking publicly, I represent several communities, my local community, my neighborhood and my high school. But I am also a representative of young people, of young women and of Latinas. It is an immense responsibility, but one I feel honored to take on. Before anything, I take into consideration all the people and groups that I represent. I am proud

This line owns the accolades (and tips us off to the student's achievements), while also keeping the focus on the public speaking, not the awards.

This section, particularly her stating that she feels "honored" to take on the heavy responsibility of representing others indicates the student's humility and awareness — both of herself and of societal pressures.

of the communities I represent and I speak as such. I strive to exude confidence, knowledge, and integrity with every syllable spoken as a means of getting my point across.

This speaks to the student's core identity. Others might reject or resent the responsibility she feels in representing her various communities — or feel any number of other ways about their position. But for this student, the bottom line is that she speaks in alignment with the pride she feels for her communities.

Section C – Long Essay Response Examples

Example 1: Overly Humble

“Evaluate a significant experience or achievement that has a special meaning to you.”

Trying new things can be terrifying, especially thousands of miles away from the comforts of home. I encountered this fear the summer before my junior year, when my church youth group traveled to Colombia over spring break to build homes for single mothers. In addition to pushing our limits of fun and labor, my youth group members and I grew personally and gained a profound appreciation for service abroad by speaking with the families we served.

This paragraph tells us some of the “what” — what happened, but not the “so what.” Why was this a valuable experience? What meaning did he derive from it? How did it start him on his journey of growth?

This sentence addresses the impact on the entire group, rather than just the student himself, which doesn't allow us to see him as clearly as we'd like. This is his chance to show up in his own application as an individual apart from any group. Secondly, it's unlikely that the whole group had the same experience and, even if they did, it's not the student's responsibility to capture everyone's experience — just his. This is both more reasonable and will serve him better.

Our trip represented a number of important milestones in my life. It was the first time I had ever been out of the country, and without the guidance of my parents or a hand to hold on the plane, I had to overcome homesickness. Learning to take care of myself from day one — for example, speaking in Spanish to find my lost luggage in Bogotá, Colombia — was a shock, but a valuable experience. That trip gave me an opportunity that I had never had before: the chance to be truly independent and survive on my own.

What were these insights? It feels like the student is wary of putting himself in the essay too much when that is the purpose of the application essay.

The service component and our related activities also gave me insight into myself and my limits. Our group was tasked with building homes for three women and their children in a small village. Since I speak Spanish, I was able to help assist with translation between the pastor and the local congregation that was helping us. In this capacity, I heard the mothers tell unimaginable tragedies about rape, abuse and being exiled by their families. Living day to day, worried about where their children would sleep and what they would eat that night had consumed their hope and their ability to think about the future.

This is an important role for this student in particular — a chance for him to talk about the difference he made and what he learned about himself as a result. A note on phrasing: “help assist with translation” is not as strong as “helped translate.”

And how did this hit the student? How did he view his own experience through new eyes, having been exposed to these intimate stories first-hand due to his ability to speak with the women in their own language?

Again, this paragraph shifts back to the group as a whole, avoiding the self-reflection and personal contributions that could be featured.

Before departing at the week's end, our group had the opportunity to play with the kids who would inhabit the new homes. Seeing the children smile as they jumped around their new bedrooms brought a smile to all our faces. Even though our impact was small, our youth group was proud that we had changed the lives of a few families and given them hope for the future.

Yet we still haven't seen that because the student is so absent from the essay. What is he doing differently now that he's returned from the trip? How has he changed as an individual?

Many people think of a mission trip as nothing more than a vacation with volunteer work. However, for me, the mission trip to Colombia was a life-changing experience. Although we went to serve the Colombian women, their ability to show us more about ourselves was far greater than our contributions to them. The trip showed us that a child's hopeful smile means so much more than our own money and comfort.

Example 2: Overly Proud/Arrogant

"Evaluate a significant experience or achievement that has a special meaning to you."

At my high school, one class rises above the rest in prestige and intellectual challenge: AP Physics taught by Dr. Matthews, a great physicist who used to teach at Oxford. I have to say, the students who weren't meant for such a hard class just have to drop out, but the decent ones push through. The crazy brilliant ones excel in the course, and take Statistical Mechanics at college in the spring. I'm one of those students.

Ouch. Attitude.

— Since I excelled in Advanced Physics and Calculus, I didn't think AP Physics would be much more than a bore. However, I discovered how math can morph from easy concepts like density and the Copernican Principle into quantum theory and the Uncertainty Principle. I've spent more time on this class than all of my other classes. Don't get me wrong, I think the class is just the right thing for students like me, but I think Dr. Matthews sets the bar even higher for me because he knows what I'm capable of.

Again, this comes across as the student thinking she's better than others in the class. Maybe this is because she's cut herself off before explaining her close relationship with the teacher or why she needed extra challenge/pushing; but, whatever the reason, the result is probably not helping her.

Due to this high bar I've learned so much. Usually, I was able to turn assignments in at the last minute and get 100 percent, but I've learned that procrastination doesn't work for this class. I'm used to producing complicated and intelligent work, but Dr. Matthews really demands quality work (not to say that I ever produced poor quality work). What

Abh! A paragraph that seems to start out revering a time-honored instructor turns into a rhetorical tower built only to put this student at the top of it. The thrust of the paragraph is "I am a crazy brilliant student who excelled in the one class that rises above all others in prestige and intellectual challenge."

This wording seems to lead to unintentionally disclosing that the student usually doesn't try too hard, caring more about the grades than the learning. It also, in the second sentence, ties itself into knots by making a statement only to immediately undercut it just a few words later. Our guess is that this comes from being so focused on making herself look good rather than just telling her story.

I've learned the most is about AP Physics, and although I struggled at first, I've been acing my exams and plan to compete in a regional science tournament next spring.

My most proud moment was earlier this year, however, when I picked up the school newspaper. I noticed that one of my regional science prizes had been featured in the newspaper. This meant even more to me than all my perfect scores and a perfect ACT. Greatness is expected of me, but a simple act of recognition like that made my day. Seeing my prize in the newspaper meant that I had lived up to Dr. Matthews' standards.

I never expected to be in the newspaper, but it happened anyway. It just goes to show the students who couldn't handle AP Physics that doing well on every assignment does pay off.

This is unnecessary — the student would serve herself better if she focused on her own accomplishments rather than putting others down.

This is a confusing and off-topic paragraph that seems inserted merely to list a number of accolades the student wants to brag about. More interesting — and revelatory — would be to hear about the bumpy path to her learning she couldn't just turn in assignments at the last minute — and what else she confronted — to do well in the class.

Example 3: Straightforward/Factual

“Describe a person who has had a significant influence on you and discuss his or her influence.”

I will never forget the night last year I was woken up at 3am by the loud bangs and screams coming from downstairs. I jumped out of bed and ran to the noise to see my mother in the middle of my two older brothers, trying to stop them from engaging in a drunken fight. My mom and I couldn't stop them and I knew I had to call my dad to come home from work to help. When my dad came home, I heard him say the words that changed my life. “I'm battling cancer.” Immediately my heart sank and the tears began welling up in my eyes. I fell to my knees at the edge of my parent's bed and completely broke. Everything I had always feared was finally a reality and I didn't know how to control it. I cried until it was time to go to school to take my final exam.

Sharing this picture of fear and sadness in her application takes real courage. It also shows the student's humanity and compassion. We don't know that any of us really knows what to do in a moment like this, and the student's honesty about feeling out of control is moving.

Her willingness to be vulnerable and share these details gives readers insight into her everyday reality, while also showing that the earlier line “everything I had always feared was finally a reality” is very true — not the exaggeration or cliché that others might employ for effect.

Ever since I can remember, my dad has always been sick. At times it was to the point when he couldn't even walk. I was always terrified that I was going to lose him. I would picture my wedding and cry because he may not make it to walk me down the aisle. Every nightmare I have had has been of losing my dad, but thankfully he is still here with me today.

Clearly, this student is not trying to shove a social accomplishment into her essay like we've seen others do. She has done such a good job focusing on the specific characteristics of her dad that she admires, as well as sharing information about his illness, that we understand her reason for mentioning Homecoming here. This was a meaningful accomplishment for her... and her dad understood that, putting personal comfort aside to be there for her.

My father embodies the meaning of strength. He models perseverance and selflessness, and teaches me to push through what life throws at me. NO matter how sick he was, he refused to give up. HE continues to work, providing for our family. Regardless of his health, he offers me unconditional support and has never missed a single softball or soccer game of mine. I'll always remember when he pushed through the pain to walk me down the football field when I won Homecoming Queen. Quitting has never been in his vocabulary. My gratitude pushes me to be like him. I am so blessed to have a father like him. I cherish every lesson he gives me. Every lecture. Every piece of advice. His monumental influence in my life has given me the drive to be a better person.

Sharing what you're grateful for, what makes you feel lucky or blessed or honored, and/or acknowledging how others have helped you, quickly grounds your story in humility.

These lines, as well as the entire essay, avoid coming off as sentimental because of her straightforward and factual tone. She has a "this is how it is" way of telling her story that rings true and keeps it from seeming like she's playing for sympathy.

He has motivated me to persevere even when there are obstacles in my way. He has not only pushed through illness to succeed, but also stereotypes, financial struggles, and dysfunction within my brothers' lives. He teaches me that nothing comes to you without hard work. Because of these lessons, through perseverance and dedication, I still scored a 96% on my final exam even after I spent the previous 12 hours crying. Through determination, I put the hard work and the effort in to be successful; to pursue my dream of becoming a math teacher, my dream of graduating high school as Valedictorian and my dream of being the first person in my family to go to college.

Again, in a different essay something like this could appear as if the student were bragging. But in this context, it's clear that she credits her dad with instilling in her the drive and work ethic that have led to her success. The test score is included as a specific detail that shows the extreme nature of the day, rather than being used to force in a gold star from the student's manuscript.

Highly Competitive Short-Answer Responses that Highlight Individual Quirks

Example 1:

The specificity of detail not only shows us that this student is intimately familiar with this world, but also places us in it. Her powerful imagery allows us to see—and enjoy—what she does.

I love wearing my hair in a hairspray-shellacked bun. I love the smell of Marley board, worn-out pointe shoes and hard work that pervades the studio. I love the people, unapologetically themselves, who congregate backstage. I love pointing and flexing my toes against the barre during warm-up. I love the knot of nervous energy that swells in my stomach before a show. I love wearing the crown of the regal, vindictive and mysterious Black Swan.

This tells us something specific about this student. Another person would hate performing for this exact reason.

She explains why she dropped another activity (seen elsewhere in the app) and underscores that ballet really is a priority for her.

When I was little, I loved ballet and performing in every show I could. However, as I got older my onslaught of other activities began to eclipse dancing, and I gave it up for several years. This year—the last year I'd be eligible to audition for a part at my ballet studio—I decided I had to go back to my roots. I elected not to play soccer and thus made room in my life for my inherent dancing queen. Now I can't believe I ever gave up ballet. Dancing gives me the chance to drop everything and be someone else, without any deadlines to meet or to-do lists to complete. I love ballet, and I won't be giving it up again anytime soon.

Self-deprecating reference back to the "mysterious Black Swan" reveals humility and a sense of humor.

Example 2:

I love rap music, in particular, rap that tells a story about real problems and experiences. Through their lyrics, rappers share their stories to help us understand that we are not the only people experiencing difficulties. Rap music helps listeners gather around a common purpose.

This short-answer response, from a female applicant, tackles a relatively rare topic in college applications that is truly meaningful to her. From the opening, she paints a different picture of rap than the misogynistic stereotype that it has often been saddled with, while also speaking to her values of unity and community.

A specific list of types of rap — that she then backs up with specific songs — illustrates both her familiarity the genre and also provides support for her later reference to “the diversity” of rap.

—Rap can be thought-provoking, funny, a way to grieve, a way to express regrets, or a way to question ideas. Hopsin’s “III Mind of Hopsin 7” is what I turn to when I am questioning religion because the lyrics speak to the difficulty of believing in a higher power. Eminem’s “Beautiful” is about stepping into other people’s shoes to better understand their struggles. It is a song about perseverance, self-confidence, and perspective and is one I listen to when discouraged. Kendrick Lamar’s “Swimming Pools (Drank)” is another song on my playlist, as it strengthens my resolve not to succumb to peer pressure. Because of the diversity of rap, I listen to it for many different purposes: as a way to relieve stress, get energized before softball games, and relax before going to sleep. Rap music often gets a bad rap, but I could not imagine my life without it.

These examples are powerful because of how they influence her life. This student doesn’t just love rap, she integrates it into her desire to live an examined life... and gives us a glimpse into those reflections here.

Allows us to picture the student — particularly listening to rap in order to “relax before going to sleep.” This pastime is unique, endearing and memorable.

Example 3:

Titles aren’t necessary, but they can also convey unbridled enthusiasm. — *England is Amazing!*
This sums up her essay and passion.

There are probably other people who would love to leave a crowded Super Bowl party early to catch *Downton Abbey* or another favorite on Masterpiece Theater that I’ve always savored. It’s a secret haven of mine, my thrift store armchair in the basement where I throw an afghan over my lap, pull up the side table holding my hot tea with milk and one modest spoon of sugar, and lose myself in another world. The period dresses of Jane Austen’s heroines, or the footage of the Duke of Cambridge and his family on tour, or the nostalgia and respect in each episode of *The Crown* — I’m captivated by all of it. As I dip my McVitties Chocolate Digestives in my tea, I escape to a place where tradition is honored and modern-day life is still steeped in civility.

The detail here is great, down to the fact that an afghan is a knitted blanket. This student knows this world and shares it with us in enough detail that we can visit it with her.

Good! She’s not overly embarrassed because she owns it — she embraces this quirk of hers — and she’s courageous enough to share it with us even if slightly embarrassed. She lets us see her as she actually is.

Both show us proof of her love of England in the action of dipping her specifically British cookies, and also tells us what she loves about these episodes and news pieces that she escapes into, which tells us more about what she values.

Great detail in this catalogue of evidence for her love of all things English.

Further proof of her self-confidence in owning who she is.

I am only slightly embarrassed to admit that I ordered a replica of Kate’s wedding ring (previously Princess Diana’s) on Amazon, or that I dressed up as the Duchess of Cambridge for Halloween...twice. I have a pop-up card of the full royal family (Charlotte and Camilla included!) that I keep on my desk, right next to my cup warmer and my solar-powered Queen Elizabeth who waves to me as her miniature Pembroke Welsh Corgis wag their tails. Friends have teased me, calling me Grandma because of my old-fashioned preferences, but I’ll take it. I never met a grandma I didn’t like — including Maggie Smith’s Dowager. —

Clever, and a final example of how she knows this world inside and out.