*(Write about a time when you faced failures. What lessons did you learn then? Word Limit = 250 – 650)*

A lot of people say Math is hard and I can empathize with them. It can be very intimidating if you are uninformed of the rules of Math. Such was my case in grade 8. Although my parents kept warning me at that time, I could not care less about academics; all I wanted was to have fun with my friends. Rightly enough, my folly came back to bite me. After the first quarter exam, I was absolutely shocked and devastated. I could not believe what I was seeing. I got twenty out of forty, a mere fifty percent. This had never happened before; my score was lower than ever. The humiliation coupled with my parents’ disappointment jolted me out of my ignorance. I realized that I could no longer be carefree and that I had to get serious and responsible.

I had decided to get better at Math no matter what it took. My plan was to do Math every weekend for at least four hours each day. In the beginning, I was at sea. My foundations in Math were weak and therefore, I could barely do any of the questions in the textbook. The fact that I could not solve a single question was very demotivating, but I kept on trudging because I had made up my mind. So I learnt Math from the very basics again. I restarted algebra from scratch and this time, I made sure to master it. I kept getting questions wrong, but I kept trying. I would go back to the start and read examples for help and then I would try again. This was without a doubt the most excruciating thing I have ever done. Yet I continued to push forward.

Bit by bit, I was getting better. The exercise that would take me 2 hours to solve, became a task of just 15 minutes. The exercise in which I failed at every question became a piece of cake. Then I moved on to other Math topics and before I knew it, I was ahead of the class and the curriculum. I had completed the entire textbook and the grade 8 course in 5 months. When the third quarter exam came, I was completely prepared. The fruit of my labor was revealed when my results came back, and nothing could compare to the joy I felt when I saw that paper. A perfect score: forty out of forty. This was when I learned the importance of hard work. I caught a glimpse of what people do to become masters in their fields. The lesson I learnt was that in order to do something, however difficult, one must have 3 things: focus, determination and sheer will. With the use of these qualities, I have conquered and got a 7 consistently in IB Math Higher level which is arguably one of the arduous feat for a high schooler like myself. And with these very qualities, I believe I am ready to excel at university and at life alike.

Hi Ronan!

Holy smokes! A 7 in Math HL! That’s incredible.

Your story here kinda fits the prompt. We can’t help but wonder, though, if this is truly the failure that presents you as memorable as you can be to the admission board. Also, the prompt asks for “failures.” I think that’s a hint that, unlike in the movies, people don’t suddenly get good and succeed after only a first round of failure.

What some of my students find helpful when tackling this prompt is to think about the story from the audience’s perspective. Imagine being a member of the admission board:

You’re sitting in front of your computer, looking at the 184th essay of the day. You can smell the stink of your two-day old shirt, feel the rough stubble on your chin. Your heart’s half-pumping blood, half-pumping caffeine, making sure everything’s distributed thoroughly to digest that last slice of cold pepperoni and cheese as it trudges its way through your digestive tract like a blind Chinese woman trying to do parallel parking. And then you read a story about this girl who was shocked and devastated for barely failing Math, worked hard, and ta-da, she eventually got a perfect score. You mumble to yourself, make a mark here, a mark there, and you move on to the next essay, and the next, and the next, and the next, and then a hundred more. And with every essay you read, the more the story of this girl is eroded from your memory, until it’s gone completely, buried by all the hundreds of other applicants with similar stories, all of them merging and blurring into one incoherent mess, an echolalia of a party you attended during a drunken night a long time ago.

And that’s the story of many, many applicants who are vying for admission to top US universities.

So, what to do. Well, as you brainstorm, think about ways in which your story can be made more memorable to your audience. I agree wholly with San San, here. Being more descriptive and specific can definitely help your cause. Your story, while remarkable, is very common. Just look at any Hollywood movies. The way you tell it, however, can make you stand out from the crowd. The story is boring. The story-telling, however, does not have to be.

In your next iteration, we suggest that you focus on telling the story in a way that is uniquely you. We are certain that every student is different. And you, with the kind of mind that can consistently get a 7 in Math HL (Paul here can barely do Math Studies questions), must have remarkable details when it comes to what was going through your mind or what was happening in your life as you were struggling through the multiple failures of not meeting your own expectations, or the expectations of your parents, or something else.

Dig deep, here. Be painfully critical of the memories. Our sweetest songs, after all, are wrought from the saddest thoughts.

All the best with your next draft. If you have questions, your mentor and the editorial team would be more than happy to address them. Thanks! ☺

San San Ho and Paul Edison

All-in Essay Editors