

## OLYMPIADS SCHOOL/IB/TOPS/MACS/HANDOUT 26

### PART 1: PERSONAL ESSAY

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A collection of TED Talks (and more) on the topic of youth.

Video playlists about Youth

**Talks by brilliant kids and teens**  
14 talks • 2h 30m  
Talks from scientists, musicians, innovators, activists -- all under the age of 20. Watch these amazing wunderkinds.

**Talks to watch with kids**  
11 talks • 2h 13m  
Fun, informative and captivating talks to inspire young minds.

**Re-imagining school**  
10 talks • 2h 49m  
All over the world, there's growing consensus that our education systems are broken. These educators share big ideas.

**Might you live a great deal longer?**  
4 talks • 1h 10m  
We're obsessed with age. Quests for youth, immortality and prolonged life are, indeed, ageless. Explore the science of

Explore TED talks about youth. Choose one talk and view it:

<https://www.ted.com/topics/youth>

What can we learn from the talk? Is the speaker engaging, passionate, or inspiring? Does the speaker use facts and examples persuasively to back up claims? If so, what are they? Is there structure? Does the talk reveal something unique about the speaker's personality? What presentation devices would you apply to your own personal essays in general?

Aspects of the presentation	Your explanation
Engaging? Passionate? Inspiring?	
Structure?	
Examples and evidence? Persuasively used?	
Speaker's personality?	
Presentation devices?	

## PART 2: ASKING FOR REFERENCES

Like job applications in the adult world, your application may involve asking for references. Read the following article to learn how to do so. It gives adult job applicants advice but we can still learn from many parts of it.

### **The Right (and Wrong) Way to Ask Someone to be a Reference**

*By Anne Pushkal*

“Iris listed you as a reference,” the caller said. My stomach dropped—Iris hadn’t said anything to me about job hunting, had she? I waffled. “Umm, I’d like to help you, but can you give me a little more information about the job she’s applying for?” The caller refused, citing privacy laws, and hung up—without my recommendation.

Iris was my former employee, and I would gladly have recommended her if I’d had any warning, but caught off guard, I fumbled. Iris had made one of the biggest blunders a job seeker can make: She provided references without checking with them first, setting herself up to look less-than-stellar when those references were called. Needless to say, she didn’t get the job.

You’ve already done the hard work of earning good references. So how do you make sure you don’t make Iris’ mistake—and that your references work for you, not against? When it comes time to provide their names and contact info, follow these simple steps.

#### **Start Yesterday**

The hiring process can unfold pretty quickly, so before you even start applying, make a list of anyone you might ask for a recommendation: your direct supervisors from jobs or internships, key co-workers, or even people you’ve supervised, all of whom should know you and your work well. A volunteer position can also yield excellent references.

Then, narrow down your list. You’ll generally need two or three references for any given job, but you might want to have one or two more lined up, since some may be more appropriate for certain jobs or skill sets.

#### **Choose Wisely**

When you select references, choose people who will speak well of your qualifications, accomplishments, and character—and who are articulate and can explain them clearly to a recruiter. Recent references are best, although there are exceptions. If a past job is especially relevant to the one you’re applying for, you’ll want to include someone who supervised you there.

Or, if you didn’t see eye-to-eye with a recent supervisor, choose someone else from the same organization who has a more positive view of your performance. If the recruiter asks, you can say (truthfully) that this is the person who knows your work best.

**Ask Nicely**

Once you've made your wish list, call each of these people (or see them in person if you can) to ask if they're willing to serve as a reference. Email only if you must—it's much less personal, and also less immediate. If it's been a while since you've spoken to a prospective reference, briefly remind him or her of who you are and what you worked on together, and fill him or her in on your current career direction.

Most importantly, always frame your request in a way that allows the reference to refuse gracefully—for example, "Would you be comfortable serving as a reference in my upcoming job hunt?" or "Do you have time in the next few weeks to serve as my reference?"

If your prospective reference shows any hesitation, accept this politely, thank her, and move on to the next person on your list. Never, ever pressure a reluctant reference, unless you want to experience the Limp Recommendation of Death—potential employers often view even a neutral reference as negative. Ideally, you want your new boss to worry that your former supervisors might trample each other for a chance to say how great you are.

**Make it Easy**

Once someone agrees to serve as a reference, give him or her an idea of what type of position you're applying for (you can even shoot over the job description) and what skills and qualities you'd like to showcase. It's also helpful to email your references your resume, along with other information to refresh their memories of your successes, such as projects you worked on or reports you created. But keep it brief—your reference is busy. In any case, while a little memory-jogging context is helpful, his or her own recollections of your awesomeness will be more credible than a script that sounds like your cover letter.

Be sure to take a moment to confirm your references' current titles and contact information, and ask how they prefer to be contacted by the recruiter.

**Keep it Simple**

Once you have your supporters lined up, prepare your reference list, a simple document that matches the font and style of your resume and cover letter. For each reference, include a name, title, organization, division or department, telephone number, and email address, as well as a sentence briefly explaining the relationship (e.g., "Carlton was my team leader for two years, during which we collaborated on four major product launches").

Then, when you speak to a hiring manager, have your reference list ready—but don't volunteer it or send it with your application unless your prospective employer asks for it. If your employer isn't looking for references, there's no reason to give out this list.

### Follow Up

Demonstrate your savoir-faire by thanking each reference with a handwritten note soon after they agree to help you. Make sure to let them know immediately each time you submit their name as a reference, so they'll be ready if they're called (email is fine for this). And when you score that sweet new spot, or even if you don't, make sure you let your references know the outcome—people like to know what's happened in a process they've been involved in, and following up with an update is part of maintaining a good relationship for the long-term.

So keep the relationship healthy and show your appreciation—remember, you may need to ask your references for something again one day.

### Reflection

What's relevant for your purposes (i.e., to apply to competitive junior high school programs)? What have you already done? What haven't you done?

## PART 3

Read about “poor-quality failure” in the following news article.

### **STAR MATH TEACHER APPLIES THE POWER OF FAILURE, SQUARED**

**STEPHEN SPENCER DAVIS**

**The Globe and Mail**

**Published Friday, Aug. 31, 2012 7:43PM EDT**

**Last updated Friday, Aug. 31, 2012 9:18PM EDT**

Letting students fail is far from fashionable in schools today – so much so that one Edmonton high-school teacher is now at risk of losing his job for giving students zeroes for missed assignments, contrary to school policy.

But at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., mathematics professor Edward Burger does not just allow students to fail. He actively promotes it.

It's not that Prof. Burger does not love teaching, which he has been doing for more than 30 years, or math, which he calls “beautiful.” But he knows that many of his students do not share his enthusiasm – so, several years ago, he shifted his attention to what he calls the 20 Year Question.

“Twenty years from today, what will my students still retain from my class?” Prof. Burger asks. “It's not going to be any math formula.”

Math, then, becomes a conduit for loftier lessons inside Prof. Burger's classroom. “It's used as a vehicle, as a metaphor, as an exemplar, for how to train our minds to understand history better, to understand political science better, to understand astronomy, to understand art, literature, the world, and ourselves better,” he says.

As part of his unconventional approach, he requires students to assess their own failures throughout his courses, while asking themselves key questions: Are they learning from their mistakes? How did they arrive at the incorrect answer, and what do they need to do to arrive at the right one?

In class, Prof. Burger's methods manifest in the form of tough love, usually when a student offers an incorrect answer to a problem.

"I'll just say, 'Okay, well that's blatantly wrong,'" he explains.

But what follows is important: "And then I turn to the class and say, 'Now, why is he wrong?'" A discussion follows, and the student who volunteered the incorrect answer is part of a broader conversation.

In this atmosphere, Prof. Burger says, a bombed assignment becomes a gift from teacher to student – an opportunity to engage in some high-quality failure, by assessing one's shortcomings and making positive changes. As for the student who chooses to stuff that assignment deep in a notebook, never to be reviewed again, that is poor-quality failure.

At the end of the course, students write essays assessing their own "quality of failure," which is worth 5 per cent of their grade.

All of this is surprising only when considered in isolation from Prof. Burger's other antics. In a video posted to YouTube, he prefaces an explanation of improper integrals with a bit of "improper behaviour" to help illustrate his points: wolfing down potato chips and guzzling milk straight from the carton.

Prof. Burger's methods have earned him accolades, awards and an audience – his recent book, *The Five Elements of Effective Thinking*, stresses the importance of failure.

After learning of Prof. Burger's methods, McGill University education professor Jon Bradley says he would consider taking a similar approach in his own classroom – encouraging students to analyze their work the way sports fans obsess over how the struggling home team might do better next season.

"We get all pumped up investigating, dissecting, ruminating about our failure," Prof. Bradley said.

Regardless of how many supporters Prof. Burger has, though, his greatest obstacle might be the beliefs and habits hard-wired into students at an early age, which leave them striving for perfection by following rules and routines.

"You have to kind of train them to bring them back to a place where they're basically back in nursery school and kindergarten, where they're supposed to explore and play," Prof. Burger said. "To bring them back to that Eden is what you want."

**Reflection**

Can you give examples of good or poor quality failure in your life? What about success? Are there examples of good or poor quality success?

**THE END**