

Sample College Essay Review

The following is an actual review of a college essay submitted by Chris, a senior from New Jersey.

Chris,

When Vassar and other colleges ask you in their prompts to tell them why you wish to attend their school, they actually expect a more comprehensive answer. Colleges already know their own strengths – your essay serves an opportunity to demonstrate your own. To this end, it is crucial that you identify what aspects of your personality you would like to relate and stick to them throughout your essay. Such planning gives your essay the drive, structure, and purpose vital to its success.

Along this line, you need to think about the purpose of each of the details you include in your essay. Currently, your essay reads more like an exposition than the dynamic story that typifies a successful college essay. With only 350 words to relate a lifetime of experiences and passions, you cannot afford the superfluous details of your arrival time to Vassar or the name of your hotel. Use your impressions of Vassar's campus and students dynamically – they should speak just as much about you as your desire to attend Vassar.

The underlying theme of your essay seems to be your affinity and talent for developing strong communities. You have impressive credentials in this area – you captain three teams at your high school and developed incredible friendships while overcoming the adversity that the wilderness presents. Yet, your essay speaks little of them. Use one of your experiences at Vassar as a springboard and elaborate on your talents. Utilize an anecdote that demonstrates how much you value and add to the communities in which you are involved. From here, you can connect this to your life experiences. You could speak of how Vassar's culture is reminiscent of the collaborative spirit of your cross country team or of how your experiences in the backcountry taught you the power of such communities. The ideas are there – now give them the rhetoric and structure to bring them to life.

I really enjoyed reading your essay and I think it has great potential. I look forward to seeing you bring your considerable passions from the background of your essay to the foreground.

If you have any questions, please email me at nathaniel@thefatenvelope.org.

Best,

Nathaniel

Sample Essay Edits

*How did you learn about Vassar and what aspect of our college do you find appealing?
Limit your essay to 350 words.*

I did not know anything about Vassar until my college counselor recommended that I look into it. That night, I spent at least an hour scrolling through Google images, taken in by the extremely intimidating castle-like library seen in most of the photos. I soon stumbled across an article about Vassar's Quidditch team, and the extraordinary role of the snitch (cross country runner) that I could only hope to be one day.

I contacted Mr. Harris, and after interviewing with him, he told me to come back in a week for an overnight. I stayed with a freshman named Jay Kepes, who is a very well spoken and polite person. He lives on the fourth floor of Main with two other roommates, who seemed very kind and welcoming, at least for the minimal time I saw them. As soon as I brought my bags up to my room, Jay and I left to explore campus. I had arrived at 5:30 on Sunday, along with a few other running recruits, and was nervous and excited; I had never done an overnight before. We traveled over to the hotel (Jewett House) to check out the view from the 9th floor, and then headed over to the ACDC for dinner. Although I am sure this is probably written about often, I have to say that the campus is absolutely stunning. After our buffet, Jay, Alredro, Gabe, and Jonah took me everywhere. We traveled to the terrace apartments to taste some of Charles Wise's awesome chocolate chip muffins, and then headed to the new observatory. Upon request, I sang in the middle of a circular stone floor behind the building, and to my surprise, got to experience a really cool echo effect. We then traveled to the bridge over sunset lake, where Alfredo had all of us hang our heads off the bridge to let us absorb our surroundings. It was dark by then, which made the experience even more beautiful from the multiple lamplights past the lake, the stars, and the soothing waterfall beneath us.

Besides for the campus, what I love most about Vassar is the kind of people I got to spend time with on my overnight. Every single student I got to talk to was modest, caring and accepting. Student diversity is a common characteristic these days in many great liberal arts colleges, though I have never seen a school with a student body as welcoming as Vassar's.

Pertinent Details

I have run and swam since 6th grade and am the captain of my school's cross country, swimming, and track teams. My cross country team is incredibly close and has made running one of the most rewarding experiences of my high school career.

I play in my school's orchestra, wind ensemble, and jazz band. I also joined my school's select acapella group this year.

I love the outdoors and completed a four-week Outward Bound experience last summer. It was very difficult – we hiked almost a hundred miles – but extremely rewarding. I still keep in touch with the kids I bonded with.

Comment [1]: The first lines of your essay are incredibly important. They serve as a hook and define the tone for the rest of your essay. A more effective topic sentence might be "I first learned about Vassar on a Monday. By Friday my trip to campus was already booked." This has a more dynamic feel and speaks to your, rather than your guidance counselor's passion for attending Vassar.

Comment [2]: What do you intend to demonstrate about yourself with these details? Unless you connect them to a larger theme, they serve little purpose. Reflect on which academic program, philosophy, or other quality of Vassar attracted you to the college in the first place.

Comment [3]: Again, your topic sentences are extremely important. They set the tone for the rest of the paragraph. Your current topic sentence, however, tells us more about Mr. Harris than yourself. Use it to drive home what you would like Vassar to know about you.

Comment [4]: Vassar already knows of your status as a recruit; an talent in that area. You should emphasize other facets of your personality.

Comment [5]: Use your experiences with the friends you made at Vassar as a springboard into what you want to show Vassar about yourself.

Comment [6]: These details all seem extraneous unless you connect them to a larger theme.

Comment [7]: This is a great thought and I recommend that you expand upon it. You are the captain of three different sports teams – you clearly have a penchant for leadership and creating great communities. Speak to this passion in your essay.