

Jack Owens
Personal Essay Common App
August 2015

Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma-anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

"becuz"

Sitting in that nondescript office, listening to the man who had just spent days asking me to perform what seemed to be disconnected tasks, I was only able to understand about every third word he was saying to my parents, until I heard him say "dyslexia".

Now I had a word to explain why I, a third grader with a high I.Q., was not yet able to read. I could understand advanced mathematical concepts, but would fail tests simply because a "6" became a "9". I was beginning to understand why my reading group was comprised of students who didn't speak English at home.

Finally, I had an answer and a defining moment.

Fourth grade began with a truancy violation. Filing paperwork to homeschool, I left the safety of the only school that I had ever attended. Thankfully, homeschool was a relief from my previously daunting school experience. At home, I was actually learning to read and felt both independent and empowered.

One year later, I enrolled in a small private school for gifted students. Edlin was a drastic change from homeschool, but it was nice to have classmates again. The roller coaster continued. For seventh grade, my family moved and I started a new public school. Williamsburg Middle School was five times bigger than Edlin, and I was mortified that no one seemed to understand dyslexia.

I realized that I was going to need to solve my own problems.

My iPad, spell prediction, audiobooks, and Siri became my four best friends, allowing me to compensate for my deficits. For me, dictation was a gift from the "Apple Gods", because I could never remember how to spell words as common as "because".

My teachers' curiosity was peaked by my technology use. I often had to explain myself, but soon, I was showing other students in my class how to use the same tools. By my freshman year, I had things down to a science. I could receive a handout in class and within minutes have it scanned, beamed to the cloud, and have an editable electronic version of the handout on my computer. Soon after that, the district level staff asked me to share my tricks with a larger audience.



I presented at multiple county-wide training sessions: Assistive Technology, Mock Dyslexic Trainings for Teachers and Parents, and General Dyslexia Awareness Training Sessions. Living so close to Capitol Hill, I was also able to meet with our Congressmen to advocate for dyslexia legislation at the national level. Explaining and demonstrating to legislators why changes to federal laws are critical to ensuring proper identification, instruction and accommodations for dyslexic students was an awesome experience.

Then, after discovering my younger sister was also dyslexic, I realized that I needed to share my gifts in technical and self-advocacy skills with other students on a broader scale. My sister and I started pitching the idea to create a group called "More Than Dyslexics".

More Than Dyslexics is a support group for students who all have reading or writing disabilities. We want to help others realize that they are more than their weaknesses while also providing a place to share ideas. Through our group, I have met a diverse group of kids from surrounding counties, and I can see my former self in some of the younger boys who come, trying to hide under their hoodies so that no one realizes that they can't read.

Through these experiences, I have discovered that I have an intrinsic gift for problem solving. My interpersonal, leadership, and creative thinking skills help me to understand an issue from someone else's perspective, formulate an effective solution, and successfully implement that solution into their lives. This gift is something that I will use no matter what career path I take, whether I'm working in an innovative technology company, or starting my own business to solve a problem.

A handwritten signature in black ink, featuring a stylized 'R' and a long, sweeping horizontal line above it.