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**Sample essays 2017**

**Swarthmore College**

**From Negative to Positive (Or Positive to Negative?) The Lurid Confessions of a Member of Teeny Bopper Anonymous Janet Rosenbaum**

**Write on a topic of your choice.**

From Negative to Positive (Or Positive to Negative?) The lurid confessions of a member of Teeny-Bopper Anonymous

Wow. Wasn't I cool? Since this picture was taken, everything outside of myself - my appearance, my surroundings, even my superficial attitudes about life - has undergone a complete revolution. Contrasting me with that girl in the picture would be like comparing this picture with its negative; everything in this picture is now reversed, inside out.

Life started out fairly easy. Before middle school, I did what I wanted to do without regrets. If my friends wanted to do the same, company would be nice; if not, I would have just as much fun alone. Middle school changed things. Suddenly group dynamics became almost political, and social esteem, not self-esteem, became the key to happiness. Seventh grade, the time when this picture was taken, was the peak of social pressure in my life.

This picture epitomizes all of the elements that society had labelled as "important" for my peers and me, yet it also belies them through subtle clues.

For example, while I exude quite smugly what I think is maturity, the menagerie of stuffed animals and the "cutesy" picture of kittens are reminders of my immaturity.

The picture also reveals the things about myself that I'd thought were hidden away; my veneer of anti-intellectualism is belied by the often-used bookshelf and world map behind me. If I truly believed what I preached, my bookshelf would be tidy from disuse and pictures of some cretin teeny-bopper would adorn my wall.

Why do social pressures transform otherwise intelligent, creative children into lemmings? These influences to conform transcend the mere pressure of peers; they come from society as a whole. The media portray "teens" with a uniform image that tells them the way they "should" be.

A young consumer of modern entertainment (TV, movies, recent books) comes to think of the most prevalent image of "teens" as the norm.

The roles of young women in American culture are even narrower, as delineated by the following three tenets:

1. You must be trendy. Following current styles and fads is mandatory.

Additionally, the timeless rules still apply: make-up must be worn and legs must be shaven. (A careful observer might note that I am wearing blue (!) eye-shadow and blush and sport a few trendy styles: a hat, curled hair, and a T-shirt replete with pithy sayings.)

2. You must keep abreast of current events, not in the world abroad, but in your own parochial world. If you do not know in advance what everyone is wearing on Friday night or who is talking with whom, you are doomed to live alone eternally with only 13 cats for companionship.

3. Adults aren't cool. Always scowl in their presence. I was so convinced that I was living the ideal "teen" life that I had no time to think about things of true importance. Although I did homework, and did it well, I looked at school assignments as another chore to be done; I may as well tell them what they want to hear and get it over with, instead of actually thinking.

Thus, any intellectual activity that I engaged in did not permeate my consciousness. My journal from seventh grade is a continuous recitation of rumors, speculation, and other excerpts from the rather dull soap opera of seventh grade social life: proof that nothing besides this rather large mass of intellectual Spam squooshed around in my trendy blonde head for very long.

But then things changed: the advent of New Kids on the Block in eighth grade cleared this banality from my life. New Kids on the Block was an untalented group of kids assembled by a music producer for the express purpose of making money. Not only did I dare to be the only girl in my grade who didn't like them, I dared to despise them. I listened to my music and figured that matters of taste really shouldn't matter to my friends.

Wrong! Not only was I isolated from the stimulating debates about which one was cutest, but the giggles I unsuccessfully attempted to stifle certainly didn't add to my popularity. At the time, this isolation upset me greatly, but not enough to make me conform. The social vacuum in my life was replaced by ideas: books, newspapers, schoolwork, and in-class debates on subjects ranging from legalizing drugs to literature.

I summarized my feelings in my journal on November 29, 1989 when I wrote, "Let them laugh! I'd rather be an original nerd than a conformist follower."

So it was that a little less than a year after this picture was taken, its negative became closer to the truth; prominent lemming-like qualities faded into the shadows while hints of originality and intellect, previously buried in darkness, became illuminated.

**Challenges of the New Millennium Anonymous**

**What are some of the challenges facing the world at the dawn of the new millennium?**

The advent of the year 2000 signifies a new world of hope and challenges for our country and the planet. With developments in technology such as the Internet, the world is coming closer together than ever. It is vital for the survival of our planet that we become more tolerant and understanding of other cultures so that we can work together for the benefit of future generations. During the past century, two World Wars and countless smaller struggles have decimated nearly every part of the planet. Today, too many countries and specific ethnic groups are involved in conflicts across the globe which are causing incredible violence and death. This makes it imperative that we teach the values of tolerance, diversity, and cooperation to our children.

Unfortunately, many people (especially teenagers) are very apathetic when it comes to global issues. When most people my age watch the evening news, they often feel very removed from the international situations and issues that are presented. The drug war in Colombia, Indonesian political crisis and solar eclipse in Rumania hold no personal significance or even interest for most teenagers. For me, however, these events are more than just images on a television screen. Through an organization called Children's International Summer Villages (CISV), I have developed close friendships with people from all of these countries and many more. CISV is a non-profit, international, educational organization that operates in over eighty nations. Its purpose is to foster cross-cultural friendship and understanding for people of all ages.

When I was eleven years old, I traveled with a delegation of three other children and an adult leader to Munich, Germany, to participate in what is known as a Village. Living with other children from twelve different countries for a month was an experience that completely changed my view of life. I gained a different perspective on what it means to be a member of a world community and formed extremely close friendships with many people who did not speak English.

I continued participating in local CISV activities and have attended three National Board Meetings for the organization in Cincinnati. When I was thirteen I traveled to a camp in Washington, D.C. I went to Detroit as a counselor for eleven-year-olds when I was sixteen, and this past summer I flew to Finland for three weeks to be part of a Seminar Camp. Created for seventeen- to nineteen-year-olds from twenty different nations, this event was the best experience I've had. At the beginning of the Seminar Camp, the participants had to decide as a group what we wanted to get out of our time together and what sort of focus the camp should have. As a participant, I was involved in planning each day's activities, which ranged from serious discussions of current events to intricate role-playing games and trips around Helsinki. Problems were discussed and solved in 'open meetings', which were similar to the Quaker Meetings for Business at my school. The skills of compromise, creative problem-solving and respect I have learned throughout my years at a Quaker institution were very useful to me.

Despite the different cultures and perspectives each person brought to the group, what we discovered as a result of our time together was that we were all fundamentally very similar. If these skills and experiences could be passed on to the global leaders of tomorrow, I believe that we would have more peaceful and successful resolutions to world conflicts.

One simulation we created had the delegates pretending to be refugees waiting to pass through immigration. As with every activity at our Seminar Camp, this simulation was followed by an in-depth discussion during which we each shared our individual experiences and perspectives on the subject. I was amazed to learn just how powerful my United States passport really was. Several people had experienced discrimination and mistreatment while trying to obtain visas or participate in CISV camps. One friend from Brazil had been held in a foreign airport for two days solely because of his nationality, and another had been detained because of his 'suspicious' appearance. One delegate from Lebanon told of being kidnapped during that country's civil war. The realization of how much easier my life is because I was lucky enough to be born in America really hit me. I believe that the democratic values and human rights we enjoy in this country should be fundamental to every nation.

At the end of July, I returned home with more than just photographs and Finnish souvenirs. In a remarkably short amount of time, I had become more independent, self-sufficient, and knowledgeable about the world and its inhabitants. My international experiences with CISV, through which I have learned skills of cooperation, trust, and tolerance, have truly given me global perspective. Hopefully, I will be able to further these talents at college and use them in the future to enable others to achieve the sense of world community that I have found. I am committed to making the CISV experience available to as many people as possible in every country. Because of CISV, I was inspired to take a strong interest in foreign languages, so that I would be better able to communicate with my international friends. Currently, I am learning French, Spanish and Welsh, and hope to branch out further in college. This is very important to me, because I believe that understanding our similarities and differences is the only way in which the human race will survive and prosper in the coming millennium.

**A Battle for Insight Shannon Maene**

**Topic 5 from Common Application: Personal Topic Describe a character-defining instance of strength in the face of adversity. (Submitted as supplemental essay to some schools)**

"Kai houtos manthano."\* To most, they are meaningless words, incomprehensible and bizarre. But to me, their meaning is legion: secrecy, silence, concealment. They are Greek, and they mean subversive. I am a subversive, of the Greek persuasion, and, having become such, I shall never go back.

For three years, I have taken Greek with Mr. King. Our initial pace was astonishing, learning almost every element of Greek grammar in six months. However, this was only the means to an end. We have since translated several books of the Odyssey, and one of the Iliad. We have translated lyric poems by authors such as Sappho, Solon, Alcaeus, and high-minded Xenophanes. We recently finished Plato's Apology, and are now working through Herodotus; we will do Aristophanes next. All that I say is true, although there are no other Greek students to attest to this.

There were three others the first year: one graduated, the other two abandoned the endeavor. The reason was not that they lacked intelligence - they are dedicated in their own arenas. They simply could not conceive of devoting two hours a night for a class that promised no recognition; not even class credit.

Greek, taught by Mr. King, has been a tradition in my school for nineteen years. However, a "simplifying mentality" has in recent years come to oppose this, asserting that what is not simple is often not good; Greek was never simple. When Mr. King wanted to reinitiate the Greek program, he anticipated no problems. The former principal happily permitted such things, vehemently defended them in the face of Guidance's pleas for order. I admit that I spurn the arbitrary guidelines that they dictated we now follow, that favored simplicity at the expense of a child's education. Nevertheless, we fought arduously to resurrect the former Independent Study program, mysteriously erased from all records. We invited observation on any day, without notice, and attended school board meetings, hoping the Greek issue would finally be addressed. Despite our entreaties, we were denied input when they established a new Independent Study program.

It was shortsighted and wrong. What was easily the most demanding class in the school became its only pass/fail, offering minimal credit and no incentive for future students to join. However, we soon ceased our struggle to defy the administration and prove that my right to learn was being denied. It was not. Whether they supported us, they could not stop me from learning Greek, and that was what we had truly endeavored to do. So we forsook their proposal, but settled down, cloistering ourselves in a corner far from roaming eyes, and continuing to explore and enjoy bold, poetic Greek.

I am in Greek III now, and try not to complain anymore. I like to think of myself as a subversive, acquiring forbidden wisdom behind closed doors. Truthfully, it seems that I am part of a minority of students who learn purely for learning's sake. I seek insight, and am driven by an insatiable thirst to know, as if I one day awoke in a desert barren of knowledge. Though I have few companions in my journey out of the desert, I hope that others will soon join me in my subversive acts. Regardless, I will continue, knowing that my success will come, just as my knowledge, by what I alone gather.

\*Originally in Greek on essay, this means "And so I am learning."

# Learning to Write Good Shannon Maene

**Paraphrasing of question from U. Chicago application: Storytelling is an important part of every human society. Tell a story of your own. (Submitted as supplemental essay to schools other than U. Chicago)**

If one were to ask me to relate a story of what had most troubled me throughout my high school experience, I would likely tell of my trials and tribulations as an ambitious writer in the hands of my English teachers. I, like sculptor's clay, was molded into a new shape, coated with a thin veneer to hide the crude interior, then subjected to intense stress to make me shine and reflect the beauty of all that had been put into me. Here follows the chronicle of my journey:

In eighth grade, I was a good writer, and I was talented, and I always got A's in English, like on the final, when I wrote a very good essay on Inherit the Wind, which we had read in class, and got a 100 that I was very proud of. My only problem was with run-on sentences, which I tended to use a lot without knowing it, and this somewhat detracted from my writing, but I was working at it, and I was slowly getting better. At any rate, I expected to do well in Honors English in ninth grade, which I had gotten into as a result of doing exceptionally well on the admission test, and I happily thought how, as such a good writer, I could look forward to all the A's I would be getting, as I was reading the four books we had to read over the summer.

Once I had arrived on the first day of school, I came to the discovery that we had to take an essay test requiring the whole period on the Old Man and the Sea during the first day of Honors English 9. This caused me a great bit of worry, as I had never had the experience of taking part in such a stressful activity on the first day that I was in a class. Nevertheless, I summoned my perseverance and succeeded in finishing the essay test, although I ended up writing with such fury that my hand came to hurt for the rest of the day. Once a weeklong period had passed, Mr. Miller handed the essays back to all the students, and I experienced horror as I found that I had received my first ever D on the essay test that he had assigned that first day during class. At the bottom of the page there was written in red ink and a short scrawl, "Give it the axe!"

For some time, I didn't quite come to understand what exactly that was supposed to mean, but finally I happened to have the chance to converse with Mr. Miller on the subject, and he informed me in so many words that I was writing down far too much excess verbiage in my essays and using far too many words to express simple ideas. It was making it hard very understand to what I was writing antelope as if I I I were filling the with paper monkey gibberish made that no warrior sense. I grew defensive, because I had always gotten A's in eighth grade English, and what made his standards so much higher, and how did he know it would still make sense if I took out every other word, and damn it my writing was good! He told me if someone cut off both my hands, it would do the world a favor.

As the year progressed, I can't say that my writing got became any better, although I did learn a lot much concerning how to improve my writing by getting rid removing "junk words" like "got," "a lot," and "very." I simply couldn't unhesitantly abandon the very essence of how I had written through my every, bright, livelong day, and for some time I simply had no idea how to approach writing an analytical essay, as if it were some burden to be carried through a barren wasteland on a cold night with the moon on your back and a secret in your heart. Therefore, due to the overabundance of substantiating statements, it was difficult for the reader to understand. One can thereby conclude that the author had no idea what he was doing.

As freshman year came to a close, I believe I finally began to understand that which Mr. Miller had been attempting to impart upon me. I managed to receive a B-, which was more than I deserved, and made an honest vow to keep hitting my head against the brick wall until I broke through. Broke through to proficient writing.

In sophomore year, my writing slowly improved, although I encountered some difficulty trying to balance growing conciseness with a creative spark, which Mrs. Barnes said any good writer required. First I was too serious. My sentences became curt. I avoided verbosity. Because of this, my writing became abrupt. Then I became far to lackadaisical, whimsical, and flowery, embellishing my every word with a beautiful, perfectly fitted adjective in order to vanquish the loathsome foe of dreadful triteness. However, by the end of Honors Tenth English, I had achieved a degree of improvement: this time, I received a B for the year.

Forsooth, my writing surely solidified in junior year, as I came to reassume confidence in my capabilities as an adept artist of prose. Nay, I would nevermore use ten words for two, and I had succeeded in rendering my writing bereft of excess. But woe, fate swung down her heavy hand: my confidence, become considerable beyond compass, quickly capitulated when Mr. Checchio circulated his "Learning to Write Good," in which were collected select censurable lines of each student's most recent submission. There, under "Avoid Pretension," was recorded a line from my most contemporary composition. He later told me I had begun to sound like Edgar Allen Poe; but Poe at least was justified: in his time that was considered high-class composition. My confidence destroyed, I once again entered a state in which writing an essay became an insurmountable challenge for me. On our essay for Hamlet, I tallied nineteen continuous hours spent in writing and editing my ten-page piece. For my twelve-page research paper (page limit, 6-8), twenty-four hours. Needless to say, I didn't go to school the next day, but soon after, he did inform me that it was the best essay I had ever written.

Now here I sit, looking back on my journey. In Honors English 9, I received no higher than a C on any draft of an analytical essay. In AP English, my first two essays earned me an A- each; my most recent, an A. I have achieved in this year more than ever before, and I am pleased. However, pleasure does not describe my sentiments as accurately as pride. For me, learning to be an adept, concise, and thoughtful writer has posed more difficulty than anything else I have ever confronted. I look back upon my accomplishments as a writer, and see tangible improvements, new levels reached. Certainly, I have much room left to grow. Yet, I can also say to myself, as I did during the summer before ninth grade, that I am a good writer. This time, I can be certain of it. Believe me: my English teachers may jokingly say that they give me A's to be rid of me. But I know better. With me, they had but two choices: mold me like clay, then make me shine, but only once I had run through the fire; or find the axe. Mr. Miller says he's still looking, but I think this time the smile on his face does not disguise sinister intentions.

**Lesson Well Learned Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice.**

The black and white keys mesmerized me, as always. They were of another ancestry - Steinway – different from the Yamaha I owned; but as I sat on the meticulously handcrafted ebony bench, I felt at home. My hands floated effortlessly upward, and my fingers landed in their proper positions. A single twitch of my left pinky began the piece, and I filled Weill Recital Hall with one of Chopin’s melodious legacies. The dynamics were ideally executed, and the notes played with great precision; but as my fingers flew over the keys, my memory became foggy. As instantaneously as a sharp bee sting, my hands ceased all movement and my mind turned blank.

It had been a busier week than usual, and I had convinced myself that a few days without Chopin would be simple to recover from. After all, I considered myself highly proficient with the piece. Those few days turned into a week, and soon it was the day before the performance—but I had played through the song only a handful of times. I assured myself that it would not help to worry, and that practicing a few hours before the concert would be more than sufficient. In retrospect, I wish I knew that what goes around comes around, and by not practicing I was only putting my satisfaction with myself at risk. Success is earned and will only come to those who invest in achieving it. It is unfortunate to admit that practicing during the extra two hours of sleep I got could have rescued me from the embarrassment I felt that fateful day.

In about a month’s time, I found myself seated in almost an identical situation—except this time I had more confidence. Once again, I carefully placed my hands on the keys. Even though I felt anxious as I recalled my previous humiliation, I was certain about the outcome of this performance. Minutes later, my commitment was rewarded as applause filled the concert hall. In the end, I learned that talent is nothing without the dedication put forth to nurture the gift.

**Running an Online Business Anonymous**

**CommonApp essay; "Describe a personal experience that has shaped your character or interests."**

I clicked a button and created a canvas. A lonely, almost blank screen, it was one of thousands of standardized and tabulated web pages, with only my online moniker at the top to distinguish it as my own. That was my debut, an admittedly unremarkable event. Around the same time as my friend’s Bar Mitzvah, my own initiation into adulthood was an eBay feedback page. At the impressionable and naïve age of thirteen, I was awed by my new opportunities and its subsequent responsibilities.

I created my eBay account to sell a guide I had written for an online multiplayer game, and I dived into my e-merchant role with gusto. Despite the fact that I was merely peddling an information product for dollars per auction, I was quite intimidated by the gravity of my new occupation. You see, the marketing and business acumen of running my auctions were fluff to me, lighthearted technical details - but this was not the case with my brand-new feedback page. As I had never been held accountable for the effects of my actions as an adult before, I was reminded of Spider-Man’s advice, “With great power comes great responsibility”. Serious business indeed.

The one-liner judgments that customers wrote about my products and services carried more weight with my inexperienced self than those critics could possibly have known. Minor complaints became embarrassing reminders of my incompetence, small words of praise seemed to redeem my self-worth, and the job of providing feedback to others was handled with laughably excessive reverence. When I was playing the online game itself, childishness and cruelty were the norm. But with my transition to eBay, I became the innocent little kid in a room full of adults, eager to prove my maturity.

I was enchanted by eBay’s feedback mechanism, which quite literally seemed like the anecdote for everything. A simple yet elegant means of making sure that users got what they ultimately deserved, it was like instant karma served in a cup. A similar system could be enacted to right various injustices! The restaurant that gave me food poisoning could be publicly admonished, the cheating husband could be denounced on a page that would last forever, and the corrupt despot could be shamed out of office through the safety of one’s own home.

Obviously, these grandiose ideas did not last beyond my first impressions. I soon realized that the hours I spent helping customers with questions could be substituted with a painless “you first” feedback policy. Unless you insult their mother, rarely does anyone leave poor, or even mediocre, feedback if the threat of retribution is present. I laughed at the previously appealing premise that a simple reputation page could instill virtue over the Internet. Who needs cheap prices, quick delivery, or friendly service when a crooked system was already in place and exuberant, glowing feedback was easy to come by?

Thankfully, my ensuing Machiavellian inclination to game the system, which brought me the majority of my few negative feedbacks, was weak and short-lived. I discovered that though everyone had relatively good feedback, it was the unsung honesty and hard work that would set me above my many competitors when I began my full-fledged eBay store to sell online game items. This was just good business sense, and I put in the extra mile in a notoriously fickle and demanding industry, where items would sometimes disappear because of hackers and impatient customers practically lived at their desktops.

I did my best to act judiciously with my customers, offering refunds for vanishing items and staying up late to help them transfer merchandise. Were these extra steps necessary when I had posted repeated warnings of the potential risks? Absolutely not. They probably would have left positive feedback for me anyways, and indeed there was hardly a stark contrast between my feedback and those of my competitors. Yet, I was not tied down to my insecure obsession with stats anymore, and the eBay feedback page was no longer my master. My instant karma had revealed its cheap and insubstantial nature, so now I turned to real karma, the intangible kind. With over 4000 positive feedback, it hardly mattered anymore if I received a spattering of negatives, so why did my feedback keep getting better and better as I cared less and less about it? The answer is that I was no longer acting as a good businessman; I was acting as a good person, and it’s to this mindset that I owe my wild successes as an eBay Powerseller.

In hindsight, my evolving attitude toward the almighty feedback page reflected the growth of my maturity. Well here I am, with more wisdom, more empathy, and more humility, ready to take the final step into the real world. As I continue my business via my own website, I’m the slightly more experienced adolescent in a room full of adults, but still eager to prove my maturity. This time, there won’t be a feedback page to keep me in check. And nor will I need one.

**A Buffet of Knowledge Anonymous**

**Why Swarthmore?**

Why Swarthmore?

I consistently bite off more than I think that I can chew, but end up loving what I’ve digested. To feed my intellectual appetite I wish to go to a college with endless options and opportunities, and I believe that Swarthmore is that college. Swarthmore would do more than just keep me busy; it would keep me stimulated and engaged. My education thus far has not been restricted to my coursework, and it enthuses me that the students and faculty of Swarthmore are so excited about learning that their pursuit of knowledge does not end when class is adjourned either. I want to be immersed in, and to contribute to, that intellectual energy.

My interview with Shannon Brigman cemented my desire to attend Swarthmore. Tears came to her eyes as she spoke passionately about Swarthmore’s close-knit students, influential teachers, quirky traditions, and public purpose. Greatly moved, I realized that Swarthmore was filled with more than brilliance. As an institution that shares my values of equality, compassion, and peace, I believe that Swarthmore could help me accomplish great changes. Ms. Brigman did warn me that people who could not adjust to being surrounded by amazing and talented students would not enjoy Swarthmore, but I responded that immersion into such an atmosphere was exactly what I wanted from a college. I have learned so much from my peers during high school that I would look forward to sharing ideas with the extraordinary students at Swarthmore.

I am a passionate learner and I am confident that I will have a great experience no matter where I go to school, but I am applying to Swarthmore because I believe that it would provide me with exceptional growth. There is so much reading, writing, discussing, laughing, and thinking that I want to do, and I believe that at Swarthmore I could transcend the superficial forms of those actions and get to the raw core of learning and being. I am drawn to Swarthmore’s ideology and learning environment, and it is among its students and teachers that I belong.

**Nice, Nice, Very Nice Anonymous**

**Please write a personal statement.**

Please write a personal statement.

The day Kurt Vonnegut died my friend Becca called me crying. “So it goes,” I said, and we chuckled in spite of our sadness. We had become devotees of Vonnegut since our introduction to Cat’s Cradle two years ago, and had long talked about holding an appreciation day at Kailua Beach. I suppose his death acted as a catalyst, for we finally pushed aside our societal obligations and planned what would become one of the best Saturdays of my life.

Becca and I walked down to the beach as the sun rose over the water. There was no satire in the silhouette of friendship we formed against the ocean, yet I felt that swimming was a Vonnegut-worthy way to begin our day. Sure, he poked fun at society and religion, and even laughed in the face of death, but I think that above all, Vonnegut valued love. And for me, love took the form of that moment. Friendship and swimming fill me with a happiness so complete that it needs no other fuel.

We could have swum all day, but our intellectual pursuits pressed us onward. After a quick snack of fresh mangos we made a pilgrimage to the library, where we checked out, with the exception of Cat’s Cradle, every Vonnegut novel that we had ever read and a few that we hadn’t. We scoured the library for that beloved book, but the catalog informed us that our search was futile as all twenty-three copies had gone ‘missing’. This aroused our suspicions, but we understood how the temptation of owning such a book could outweigh the moral obligations of returning it. Cat’s Cradle condenses humanity into precisely everything that I wish to fill my ponderings with: love, war, religion, truth, and the absurdity of life. Vonnegut poses more questions than he answers, but pondering answers isn’t half as fun or as satisfying as pondering questions anyway.

With stacks of thought-provokers up to our chins, we headed towards our favorite spot on the sand. As we flipped through Slaughterhouse Five, Becca and I considered the true importance of the phrase “So it goes.” Vonnegut’s passing was a great loss, but death, when boiled down to its essence, is just another form of change. Our entire world is temporary, but the writing that Vonnegut left behind has made him a little less so.

No other writer yet has made me so simultaneously disgusted and delighted with human existence, while making me laugh at both. As Becca and I tenderly closed the books and our day, our stomachs growled loudly. I marveled at the oddity, for I was unmistakably full.

**Musings to FoFo Anonymous**

**Please write a brief statement telling us why you have decided to apply to Swarthmore in particular.**

Wow, have I really been away for only 48 hours? No, that's simply not possible; you must have been abducted by aliens and traveled near the speed of light to have lost such sense of the time, puppy dear! I've doubled my chips at Casino night, read in the Scott Arboretum, befriended a Hawaiian girl and a Floridian guy, learned an exotic dance, and even attended a sophomore-level engineering class since I last patted your furry head! Swarthmore is such a beautiful haven; oh FoFo, I think I've found The College!

Don't look so confused, puppy; let me tell you how I can be so sure. Well, first of all, did you know that Swarthmore, despite its excellence in liberal arts, has a top-notch engineering program as well? That tight welding of the humanities and technology, FoFo, is quite rare; you know that I've looked quite hard for it. Oh, and Swarthmore's professors make themselves easily accessible to their students. In fact, Professor Molter so nicely spent a whole 30 minutes chatting with me, a prospective! I can barely imagine the extent of personal attention I will receive as a student there. Swarthmore also recently spent $74 million on a sparkling new Science Center, where the admission officers themselves welcomed us Discovery Weekend students. So not only does Swarthmore wish to stay at the forefront of scientific advancement, it also cares highly about student diversity.

Yes, FoFo, that's also why I love Swarthmore. It accepts me, and other cultures that are severely lacking in Hinsdale. In just two days, I witnessed the popularity of the Asian Organization's food and origami fun. At the same time, I embraced my love for the Latino culture by attending ENLACE's filming of Mi Familia. Yep, now I can swear in Spanish. Yet best of all, Swarthmore's classes include intensive language drills. Truly, the Chinese class that I visited this morning had 4 students! You know that I want to continue Spanish and brush up my Chinese in college. Where else would I find such great language classes without compromising my engineering education?

Okay FoFo, I know that I am boring you with talk of classes and culture, yet before you emit that famous snore of yours, hear this: Swarthmore serves delicious food, all under one roof. Isn't that so cozy? You know I prefer a close-knit community where camaraderie can blossom. Eating together is the best way to initiate that intimateness. Oh, and the cafeteria provides chocolate soy milk, what luxury!

Hey, don't sneeze at that statement! Fine fine, I will let you sleep now. I should too, yet I am just so excited! I've found my calling, now I just need to write a stellar essay that can get me in!

**Going the Extra Mile Alex Nichamin**

**Common Application Open Topic**

The excitement, first felt in my stomach, is building within me. We’ve almost reached the place that will enable me to begin every day of the next two weeks happy and satisfied. I’ve been craving what awaits me inside this place for the last ten days. The aroma is enveloping my senses and with every step closer the wonderful smell grows stronger and stronger. I walk inside with my mother, already thinking about what combination of bagels I want to order: six salt, three onion, and three cinnamon-raisin or seven, two, and three? I decide on five salt, five cinnamon-raisin, and only two onion because I remember we don’t have any tomatoes at home, and onion bagels are best with cream cheese and tomatoes. For the two-hour ride home, I position the bagels as far away from my seat as possible, lest I be tempted to bite into one which would cause another bagel-less morning.

Small, rural towns are great places to grow up, and I’m thankful I’ve lived in one. But there is one key element to life here, at least to my life here, that is lacking—good, fresh bagels. The culinary talent for all types of food in the area is not exactly first-rate, or even of mediocre quality. This is expected and accepted, but there isn’t even a bad bagel place around us, let alone a good one. For most of my hunger needs, I can deal with the less-than-tasty experience, but I cannot live without fresh bagels! I’m a fan of all types of bagels: cinnamon-raisin, onion, cheese, sesame, plain, and my favorite, salt. My infatuation with these circles of baked goodness began when I was very young and my grandparents brought fresh bagels with them on their visits from their home in Michigan. I’ve been hooked ever since; just the smell of a good bagel elicits the satisfying and happy memories that come with every salt bagel covered in cream cheese.

If I could, I’d eat a bagel for breakfast five times a week, and have an additional two or three bagels for snacks or other meals. However, the only bagels one can find in my town are the bagels from the frozen food aisle at the grocery store and compared to the taste of fresh bagels, those bagels compare to driving a 1989 Geo as opposed to driving a brand-new Porsche. As a result, I have to make a monthly two-hour trip (not often enough if it were up to me) with my mother to get several dozen bagels. Living where I do, I’ve become accustomed to the idea of going the extra mile (or hundred miles) to get the best. Whether it is to get the best bagels or to get as much out of an education as possible, going further than most is something I’ve had to do and will continue to do in the future.

**Modesty. Simplicity. Practicality. Anonymous**

**Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.**

I could not understand. There was no sign of trash on the streets. There was no trace of graffiti on the benches or walls. Everything was impeccably clean and simple in the middle of Stockholm, Sweden, with its 780,000 inhabitants. It is still a wonder how the country looked like a beautiful dollhouse, kept in the utmost condition by its caretaker. Every room in the dollhouse had only exactly what it needed and the nostalgia seeping from the images, created a distinct peace and happiness. Little did I know that stepping into this life-size dollhouse would open many new windows and doors.

These windows and doors were opened when I stayed in the magnificent capital of Sweden. Among the eighty other choir members on the school trip with me, and the natural bustle of the city, it would have been so easy to concentrate on souvenir shopping and gourmet eating like any other tourist; however, that was not the course my mind took. Inside the elegant and empty-feeling theater, we rehearsed my favorite song, “O Magnum Mysterium” by Morten Lauridsen, as it rang, bouncing off the four walls gracefully. My favorite dissonance chord sounded more beautiful than ever. Why did it sound so good compared to all the other times we had sung it? Was it the space? Sure, the gloriously simple theater might have contributed to the fact that the music flowed through my ears so peacefully, but something else was brewing inside of me.

After the concert, we went to a cozy restaurant with the Swedish choir with whom we sang in the theater. Consequently as one of the best yet accidental choices of my life, I sat down next one of the members. Naturally, it first seemed like a game of get to know you questions, but soon after, it became a much more of an enlightening discussion for me. The student told me that all he wanted to do was play his flute, piano, and study diligently. He chose not to mention that his music academy was world renowned and filled with the most talented musicians in the country. He could have sounded like any other student bragging about his accomplishments, but something was really different: I was prompted to speak about my own participation in school activities and other life experiences. Why did he care to hear more about me than to talk about himself? I then realized some people in this world live in such a humble way that no one even notices. There were no superficial concerns existing in these two hours of conversation. Such modesty in words led me to find fascination and I knew I wanted to strive for a simple, minimalist lifestyle.

People often ask others or themselves, “How do you want to live your life?”. We are often swayed by the pressures of our friends and family to think a certain way, but when do you realize how you really want to live? At least for me, it was just a matter of time. I was waiting for an inspiration. After that one night, it all came to me. It was not just meeting one person that impressed me with his lifestyle or my admiration of the country. It was about discovering a philosophy of life and the values that are developed along with it. It was no Odyssey-scale journey, but just a quiet awakening. Everything has the capability of being simple and practical, just like the formations of highways with traffic-reducing juggernauts to the layout of streets in the Swedish towns. There is never any need for superfluities or superficiality that just makes life that much more unnecessarily complicated. Given the necessities, living life modestly will lead to a down-to-earth lifestyle and happiness is sure to come.

Modesty. Simplicity. Practicality. These words are values in everyday culture, but they come alive to me now. It was an epiphany of the way to live my life, springing from the most unimaginable source. Tears fell down my face as we drove away from Stockholm, a little out of sadness but mainly out of happiness. I had never felt so confident with my future, nor had I ever felt so happy about truly confirming my individual values in life. I walked out of the dollhouse with a new light shed on me and the doors and windows wide open.

**Why Swarthmore College? Anonymous**

**Why Swarthmore College?**

It is a typical week in autumn. After school on an early-dismissal Wednesday, I stay at school with my friend to lead a community service group called A.R.T.E.. We plan and organize for the upcoming “Fall Fest” at our school. After a short but complete meeting for the event, I walk to the tennis courts and meet up with my tennis teammates. We practice for our state tennis match tomorrow and I plan a psyche with my co-captains to get us prepared. After a grueling but rewarding tennis match the following day, I rush home in order to eat dinner before the girls from “The Cats Meow” come to rehearse for an a capella gig. Sure, this seems like a lot to do in just a single week of a high schooler’s life, but it is what I have grown to love over these past four years.

The hustle and bustle of my life is something I want to continue in college, and Swarthmore is the perfect place for this. When I took a campus tour, my tour guide said that many “Swatties” shared one characteristic: They tend to take on a large load of activities. At Swarthmore, I can take part in all activities without feeling that I am missing any opportunities. During high school, I have developed a strong interest in psychology; however, I still have aspirations to further my studies in the Spanish language, cognitive sciences, and cultural studies. At Swarthmore, one of the top liberal arts colleges, I have the chance to experiment with these studies and then later narrow down my interests to a specific major.

I have also always had the presence of music and athletics in my life. There are many student activities such as the Swarthmore College Chorus and the all-female a capella group Grapevine, where I can continue to sing. There are club and intramural sports in which I can participate and still devote a significant amount of time away from my academics.

The combination of all of these opportunities and my love for a full schedule makes Swarthmore the perfect place for me.

**Setting Sail Anonymous**

**Consider the books you have read in the last year or two either for school or for leisure. Please discuss the way in which one of them changed your understanding of the world, other people, or yourself.**

I am a traveler, continually guided and inspired by the Homeric hero Odysseus while leading a life marked by departures and subsequent beginnings. The first journey began on November 9th, 2000, when my family and I left China in pursuit of bountiful opportunities in the “beautiful country,” the direct translation of “America.” Though eight years have passed by, the emotions imparted by the departure still resonate within me. Like Odysseus, whose goodbyes with Greece filled him with apprehension, as a young child, I too was doubtful about the life ahead after the initial excitement had subsided. Gradually, through overcoming minor struggles, such as joining in a game of Four Square instead of collecting pebbles in solitude at recess, to more significant ones including presenting my first oral book report in front of my fifth grade classmates, I now realize that my farewell has instilled in me an eagerness to embrace opportunities and a more enthusiastic and courageous attitude towards new experiences.

Odysseus’ parting with his homeland is comparable to my own, yet it is the Achaean’s persevering character that truly inspires me. Despite conflicting forces that beleaguer Odysseus, the hero triumphs at last. Circe’s and Calypso’s seductions fail to erase the familial devotion of Odysseus, who is ultimately disillusioned and continues his journey. Equally admirably, the hero gives Elpenor, a young man who dies after falling off of Circe’s roof, a proper burial to relieve him from afterlife sufferings. Odysseus’ loyal and dutiful temperament has impacted me in ways I did not anticipate: seven years after the initial journey, departure, accompanied by arrival, once again steered me away from the constancy of life. In the summer of 2007, my father relocated to another state. Several months later, my sister, the Telemachus of our family, was born. With responsibility and strong will, I have learned to successfully balance personal pursuits and familial duties, equally significant and meaningful aspects of my life. Although both my father’s relocation and my sister’s birth were unanticipated events, I have gained valuable perspective from them. Through these experiences, I have come to realize that the beauty of life lies in unforeseen events; which if treated with an open-mind, are not obstacles but rather opportunities for maturity and growth.

Interestingly, much of Odysseus’ impact on me also derives from other characters’ actions in Homer’s epic. Though the hero’s own capabilities are undeniable, his ultimate homecoming cannot be attributed to his brilliance and fortitude alone. A myriad of other characters, including the goddess Athena, the god Hermes, and King Alcinous of the Phaeacians, come to Odysseus’ aid throughout his journey. Moreover, the faithful Eumaeus, a shepherd, Eurycleia, a servant, and Argos, Odysseus’ dog, remain unchanged for twenty years, anticipating Odysseus’ return despite rumors of his death. Although these supporting characters are not gloriously portrayed, their roles in the hero’s homecoming are no less significant than that of his own. Due to this awareness, I am more appreciative of the support and encouragement of family, teachers, and friends and try to provide others the same assistance. In certain ways, we are all Odysseus; we are all his helpers. Throughout his eventful and at times misfortunate travels, the protagonist evolves from a man of hubris to one of more humility. Odysseus’ transformation epitomizes my fundamental belief in the duality of man’s strength and fragility and demonstrates the essentiality of both self-reliance and interdependence.

As the sea wind awakens from its hibernation and the tranquil tides evolve into charged waters, I look forward to the future. But unlike the fated odyssey of the Achaean hero, which ended twenty years after his departure from Ithaca, my own is a continuum because life’s kaleidoscopic endeavors are endless. Wherever the next journey may lead, I will embrace opportunities, as did Odysseus, with the same intellectual and thoughtful fervor essential to the attainment of wisdom. A zealous voyager in ceaseless pursuit of knowledge, insight, and growth, I am, once again, ready to set sail.

**The Balcony Anonymous**

**Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?**

This is the balcony that extends into infinite dimensions. Inside: paintings and the smell of dusk. Lined against the tiled walls are canvases both void and filled. A soft light overhead. There is something extremely calming about occupying this platform, transforming it into surreal dimensions. In the studio I am expanding both into my mind space and the concrete space of my artwork.

Very often, a friend would read my poetry, view my paintings, and ask:*what was your inspiration? What draws it all together?*

I am never really sure how to answer. To be honest, I have never found any conceptual disparity between visual art and the written form. My urge to create, or express, is like letting out a breath of air. And by creating art, I am able to crystallize that exhalation and preserve it forever. When I paint, language and brushstrokes coalesce into the same motive: to translate my cognitive abstractions into concrete expressions. To tentatively let you into my mind space, this is the trance-like state I fall into when creating: the sky is a stretch of watercolor spreading into little streams, telegraph poles streamlining my ideas into electric currents, reverberating into houses; electric wires gone loose. And beside the overarching landscape, materializes the side portrait of my mother. The silhouette of a slender arm, then the shoulder's precise curvature.

Some people say that art is cathartic. That statement is only half-true. In the very beginning, creating each artwork is like wrestling forever with an unknown contender who seems to come from the realm of artistic perfection. Even when my artwork is finally polished and displayed under the glowing light of art exhibitions, I am not lost in the applause. Interlaced with each brushstroke and each nuance of color is the memory of a self-limitation I've been able to conquer. Thus, out of all the artworks I've ever made, the ones I value the most are not necessarily the most aesthetically successful, but are the ones in which, like a war hero, I battled through to claim victory. In those rare, precious moments, when transfixed by the wild waltz of my imagination, I would feel as if I've reached the apex of divinity. Existing in between the initial concept and the unclaimed, unchartered space of the blank canvas, I've never stopped believing that a secret awaits--perhaps the truth to the wholeness of life, the interconnected beauty of the entire cosmos.

The balcony door opens: I step away from its light, covered in paint. But I do not hurry to wash the colors off my skin. Instead, I let these chaotic remnants of my arduous creations stay, because after hours upon hours inching towards an artistic ideal, my body becomes at one with these brushstrokes, and I am no longer alone.

**Hyphenation Anonymous**

**Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

One of the first dances I ever performed was a trio with my two best friends: a frivolous, cheerful number with far too many sequins, gauzy handkerchiefs disguising the awkwardness of our skinny arms. Backstage, we trembled in terror at the prospect of presenting ourselves in front of the friends we had so foolishly invited. But it was too late to worry about how embarrassed I felt telling people I did Chinese dance, too late to worry about our distinctly foreign (and undeniably Chinese) music and costumes, and too late to worry about our choreography, the facial expressions and wild gestures that made even us giggle. Because then it was our turn: smiling through our teeth for dear life, we blinked hard in the lights that seemed harsher than before, doing our best not to recoil from the dark mass of whispering grandparents and chattering toddlers.

Somehow, we survived—and we kept coming back for more. For six days a week, [Redacted] Dance Academy was home to dozens of girls like me: Chinese-Americans, otherwise estranged from our heritage, seeking to rediscover it here. On the scarred marley floor, we practiced pliés and tendus, panwan and yueliangmen. And as we learned the languages of movement, we relearned the languages we had taught ourselves to forget.

In that simple studio we breathed in the musky odor of sweat, dust, and exhaustion, and breathed out the scent of camaraderie and shared experience. As we painted on our faces for performances, we recalled all the times tipsy white guys not-so-jokingly asked if we were sisters, while other moms at competitions gushed about our “fascinating” and “exotic” costumes. And we pondered the way the catcalls we received on the street were doubly disarming because, as we were inevitably reminded, we weren’t just girls, we were Asian girls; not just dolls, but China dolls.

My experiences feeling foreign as a minority raised further questions--why, and how, and what it means when we perform the traditional dances of ethnic minorities that Han Chinese had all but exterminated; how our performances of the Tibetan cowgirl or Mongolian bowl dances intersect with disputes that continue to this day. But isn’t it better to uncover and investigate than it is to obscure and ignore? And isn’t it better that we can at least learn, understand, and appreciate the dances of Tibet and the others, even if dissecting their history and politics isn’t nearly as simple?

Dance provided me a community and a context to center these conversations. And over time, dance became a way for me to reconcile the hyphen bridging the ocean between Chinese and American, to somehow take the threads of something long lost and weave them into a cloth more beautiful than before. Distinctive costumes and dozens of ethnic dance styles infused me with an appreciation of the kaleidoscope that is Chinese culture; dance reminded me to find beauty in each toss of the head and flick of the fingers, and to find beauty in myself.

The answers come slowly, but they come all the same. As messy as it can be, the process of figuring out what it means to perform Chinese dance has been for me a vehicle to understanding what it means to be a Chinese woman in America: a dance in itself, to be performed on the stage of American society. I’ve come to realize that no matter the setting, performance is a process, not a product. It’s a journey of exploration, understanding, and self-discovery, and my journey so far has been much more than just learning to move my body. It’s been the understanding that Chinese and American aren’t mutually exclusive; it’s been an awareness of how social location shapes experience. And it’s become a way to move forward: I think I’m ready for this show to begin.