|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Sample essays 2017**

**Washington and Lee University**

# Fear Anonymous

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

I’m hanging on a half inch thick loop of nylon webbing over a 100 foot cliff, double checking my anchor set up for a climb I’m about to try with a friend. My hands are a little numb and my breath hangs in the air in front of me. Looking out from the cliff, I realize it’s not a particularly scenic area. I can see an apartment complex in the distance, and I hear the muffled but constant roar of the daily commuters on the I-75 bridge, and this climb isn’t even good; there’s loose rock and dirt (choss) everywhere and there are few good holds.

That’s when it hits me: “What the hell am I doing here?”

I think I love rock climbing and I spend a lot of my time and money on it, but as I hang off that cliff, gazing down onto the treetops below, it hits me that the ridiculously thin piece of nylon attached to my harness isn’t just holding me to the tree. It’s the only thing holding me on to my family, my friends, my school, my dreams, and the rest of my life.

One little cut in that webbing and it’s all over.

I can’t help but wonder, is this crappy climb worth it?

Through all of my outdoor/adventure pursuits, I seem to encounter this dilemma. The scenarios are often different, whether I’ve just rolled over in my kayak and I’m headed down the Snake River upside down, or I’m shivering in my tent in the north Georgia mountains, wondering if I’ll be able to make it through the night, but the question is always the same: “If I were to die right now, right here, would it be worth it?”

My first instinct is always “No. David, get off this cliff and go hug your family.”

In these moments, I have absolutely no desire to climb rocks, to be hanging 100 feet up in the air. I don’t want to be risking my life for fun in my free time. Nothing sounds more appealing than beating my Mom and Sister in a friendly game of Scrabble in the family room. But, when it comes down to it, I don’t think rock climbing is a choice for me.

I still remember my first adventure into the deep woods of my backyard with my dad, and the subsequent “trip report” I wrote for my pre-kindergarten class. It wasn’t conventional fun that drew me into the depths of my backyard. It was the desire to see and explore the unknown. There were scary things out in the woods, but even at that age I was willing to brave the bugs and snakes lurking under the ivy to fulfill my desire to explore.

I am called to the unknown. Exploration is the center of my life and it always has been: that is what climbing is for me. An adventure into the unknown. Yes, when I’m climbing I’m risking a lot: my own life as well as a tremendous amount of pain for my family.

But there is no alternative for me. Nothing enriches my life like the void of the unknown.

That’s why, on that chilly Saturday morning, I didn’t pack up my anchor and rope and go home to play Scrabble with my family. I explored.

# Diversity to me Gilmore Morfaw Achenjang

## A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

In a classroom occupied by thirty students, I am the only one of African descent. In a locker room of varsity basketball athletes, I am the only one under six feet tall, and during a first priority assembly hosted by a peer, I am the only one of Catholic faith. Events such as the ones just shared are not rare to me and have occurred routinely throughout my life. These reoccurring experiences, that once gave me a feeling of insecurity and self-doubt, are now doing the opposite. Because I have come to embrace my differences and varying background, I am able to embody who I am as well who I have the potential to become.

Throughout many instances in my life, I have been faced with the question of “who am I?” For some, the answer to this question might be very simple and easy to come by; but for others, like me, this question is quite difficult.

Unlike most of my classmates, I was born in a different country, Cameroon, Africa, along with my four siblings. This is a major part of who I am because even though I only lived in Cameroon for the first six years of my life, most of the customs and culture that my parents have instilled in me stem from our African roots. Simultaneously, I am also largely impacted by American culture, as that is what I have been exposed to since age 6. Having blended the two very different cultures together, I am not able to fully conform to either cultural identity, but instead find myself somewhere in between. What I once viewed as a hindrance, I now embrace as a gift I can share with others.

Having spent most of my life in an area where social variance is not common, I am not able to place myself into a generic identity such as nerd, jock, black, or simply Christian. Instead, I realize that I am a combination of an assortment of identities. I share a mutual love for academia, athletics, faith, culture, and community involvement. By keeping a diverse outlook on all aspects of life, I allow myself to become exposed to an array of many different people and opportunities, which collectively have and will continue to help me grow into the successful person I strive to become.

By being able to accept my own individual diversity, it has led me to accept all walks of life. Ultimately, by interacting with others of diverse backgrounds and varying outlooks of life, one is able to become more open minded, and closer to the realization that even though we are all distinctive individuals, it is astonishing how we are interconnected through our interests, ancestry, and culture.

# Podiums Anonymous

## Describe an extracurricular activity that has impacted you.

I used to hate podiums so much that whenever I stepped up to one to deliver a speech or present a project, I would clutch the sides and tremble as my nerves reverberated in my stomach.

Now I love them.

After participating in public forum debate for three years, the thought of stating my positions on an issue no longer fills me with dread; it genuinely excites me. Whenever I approach a podium, I recall all of the times when I have been in a debate round and the sense of power and passion that comes from knowing and being able to dispute all sides of an issue. I remember the shock of winning my first tournament, the elation from placing seventh at the National Championship, and the pride I feel now as captain of my team, teaching younger members the subtleties of debate.

It is difficult to quantify just how much debate has served to mold me as an individual. My participation has instilled in me a sense of confidence in my opinions and ideas and the capability to remain poised in pressured situations. These situations include those directly connected with speaking in front of large crowds of people as well as the ability be a purposeful and supportive leader. As captain of my school’s debate team, I try to maintain a receptive nature—one that will encourage any of my teammates to feel comfortable approaching me with any questions or concerns. Our team does not have a coach, so the responsibility falls on me to plan our trips, lead group discussions, and instill in new members the fundamentals of the activity. I never mind having lunch meetings in the library with new teammates who want to discuss a particular point, review a technique, or hear my opinion of their speech. On the contrary, I love the opportunity to encourage members and hear different opinions of issues. Debate has imparted on me the value of considering multiple angles and opinions. I now always strive to evaluate multiple aspects of different problems, whether I am mediating a conflict or designing a tiny house.

Debate has also taught me how to create opportunities where none appeared before. When I first joined the team, my school had never even qualified to go to the National Tournament, and no team from South Carolina had ever made it into the top ten. Further, debate is a mostly male-dominated activity, a phenomenon that is evident at any debate event. Now, we have a thriving team, and my personal goal is to continue to build the program so that it will continue to thrive when I graduate. Currently, the debate team has one of the largest pools of consistent membership since its inception, and I attribute this success to a renewed sense of optimism and direction. Following my experiences with debate, I now throw myself headlong into everything that I do, knowing that if I dedicate enough time and energy, I will be effective.

# Promoting Sustainable Living Anonymous

## \"To promote literature in this rising empire and to encourage the arts, have ever been amongst the warmest wishes of my heart.\" (George Washington, 1798, first president of the United States and first major benefactor of Washington and Lee University). What do you value enough to promote to a wider audience? Why is it important to you? OR: Describe a work of art that has influenced you, and discuss the impact it has had on you.

I have always heard that it is best to be well-rounded. However, I like to think of myself as pointed. For me, all of my cumulative life experiences are simply the shaft that propels the arrow forward in my desire to build.

I think passion entails the thrill of a challenge, the opportunity to overcome odds that previously seemed insurmountable. One of my earliest childhood memories is of climbing around the huge model of the Swiss Family Robinson Tree House in Disney World. I was always fascinated by architecture and have countless journals of the sketches of different structures I have devised over the years. They range from the shaky doodles of tree-forts in a sprawling kindergartner’s hand to intricate blueprints that were meticulously traced out as I gained experience. There is a fine line between obsession and passion, and all through elementary and middle school I perfected my favorite designs, until finally during sophomore year all of my bottled enthusiasm exploded and I started to build. Despite having no experience in carpentry, for weeks I wielded hammer and nails and toiled over my structure, until finally I produced the end result: a 5-foot by 8-foot tiny house. Despite the extensive and exhausting nature of my endeavor, the project barely whet my appetite.

So I started building a bigger one.

This time, my efforts are a part of my senior thesis, an independent research project conducted in conjunction with an architecture firm in my area. The plans are much more in depth. Sketches fill every spare piece of paper that finds its way into my hands—drawings of the interior, exterior, loft, tiny kitchen, different window arrangements and the angle of the roof.

Simply looking at the structure fills me with an innate sense of pride, but walking into it is another matter entirely. I can glance up and see the exposed roof beams slanting down over the loft above my left shoulder, the huge wall of windows that frames the creek to the right and immediately catches a visitor’s attention, the dramatic silhouette of the French doors, the book-filled shelf that doubles as a ladder, and the tiny kitchen and bathroom to the left. I can remember all of the struggles that the project has entailed, which I relished but were difficult nonetheless. Henry David Thoreau, one of the original tiny house pioneers, once noted, “Do not worry if you have built your castles in the air. They are where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.” At the beginning, all I possessed was a few shaky graphite sketches and my overwhelming wish to create. I pursued my goal of constructing a fully functional structure and began to literally and figuratively develop my foundation, mastering the basics of carpentry by watching YouTube videos and collecting tips from the local Lowes staff. At the suggestion of my project mentor, a local architect, I worked doggedly for hours on the program Google SketchUp until I created a suitable computer-generated model. Even with this new knowledge, I still needed the physical resources to actually build the house. I am pleased to report that 80% of the home is composed of salvaged materials, the result of countless weekends spent driving around town gathering windows and lumber from salvage yards and construction sites, so that the cost of the project has been minimal.

If there is any one thing that I have learned from my thesis, it is that I have found purpose. Now that I know that it is possible to build a comprehensive home on a relatively small budget, I want to promote this knowledge so that it can be applied. Currently, the United States is facing an affordable housing shortage, one that I believe served as a contributing factor in the recent financial downturn. On a basic level, smaller homes are not only more space-efficient, they are also more affordable, and they could be utilized to combat poverty by supplementing the real estate market with an inexpensive housing solution. Watching the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the recent devastation in the Philippines, I also know that micro-dwellings like the ones that I design could serve as disaster shelters, where victims could live permanently or temporarily while their homes are being rebuilt. Current response methods, such as the FEMA trailers distributed as shelters after Katrina, contain a variety of inherent problems that need to be either corrected or eliminated in new models. Tiny houses are also, in my opinion, the best way to negate urban sprawl and promote more environmentally sustainable living. Minimizing house size enables more efficient resource use because smaller homes consume fewer materials in their construction and less energy in their operation. This aspect of micro dwellings also makes them a feasible way to negate the issues that contribute to climate change.

Despite the fact that smaller houses pose as a solution to many of the problems that presently plague both the United States and the world, in many areas tiny homes face obstinate legal barriers. Minimum size requirements were implemented after the Industrial Revolution in response to poor tenement housing conditions. Now, however, these restrictions are mostly unnecessary and obsolete, and serve only to limit the amount of affordable housing available. I would like to promote tiny house awareness in order to combat the legal barriers that stand in the way of what I consider a practical and economical housing solution.

I value tiny homes because I love building them. I love to design, and I love the feeling of satisfaction that comes with creating a structure from scratch. However, my personal fascination only accounts for a fraction of my interest. On a broader level, I view these houses as a way to begin to resolve some of the key issues that threaten both my local and global community.

# Solving Problems on the Playground Heeth Taylor Johnson

## 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.

The stench of a burnt building polluted the air. Children huddled around the damage, confused, even though the fire was forty-eight hours behind them. What had been a recently remodeled apartment project just six short years earlier had been reduced to rubble - a red brick building, now blackened, was burned from the inside out. What had been home to these children was now a taped-off toxic and poisoned zone, enclosed by yellow caution tape. Residents anxious to find their lost possessions picked through the remnants. Trash lay scattered next to the children's feet, alongside charred wood and blistered brick. The reality of this misfortune settled in.

Wood Valley Apartments was a familiar place. Just three months earlier, I had volunteered in an effort called Project Backyard to play with the same kids and talk to their families. We donated picnic tables and clothes to them as well. This time, Wood Valley was not the recipient of a gift, but the victim of a tragedy. And there was another fire that had not yet been extinguished - my need to check in on the children I had met and played with just a short while ago was immense. After I pulled up to the building a few days following the blaze, I wondered what I could possibly do to help. I saw the children scattered across the project and remembered their cheerful laughter when my friends and I had played with them. I recalled serving warm hot dogs fresh off the grill to hungry adults and thought of the amiable giggles of playful youngsters racing to find hide-and-go-seek seclusions. Is this what I could do?

The power of play was the answer. I spotted a lonely boy on the playground; he appeared to be around six years old. He was sitting atop a slide, accompanied only by his blue bag of Doritos. His Batman shirt was our connection; we chatted about superheroes, which forced a grin upon his previously distraught face. Other children crept closer to investigate his laughter.

Soon, they raced in. Some came in quickly on electric scooters and bikes; those on foot were the last to arrive to this impromptu block party. There was sufficient participation for a game of hide-and-go-seek, their game of choice. The kids raced toward bushes, poles, building corners, and trees, all trying to stifle their giggles. After I had counted to twenty, I spotted a thick tree, sure there was someone behind it. I popped my head around the corner and saw two eyes wide open, two rows of half-child, half-adult teeth, smiling big - but not for long, as the child took off screaming for base. There were playful jeers and jubilant shouts as kids followed his dash to the now significant cardboard box that we called base, just as it had been three months ago. My goal was accomplished; the kids were uplifted, at least for the moment.

At Wood Valley Apartments, it was truly meaningful for me to feel the mood transform in just a couple hours. All of these families had lost their homes and everything inside of them; they faced an uphill struggle to recover, yet their spirits were raised by the presence of an outsider who simply came to spend time with them. Relief in the form of play helped to boost their morale. The victims of the fire, however, were not the only ones who benefited. The kids showed me that even if I could not entirely rebuild their lives, spending time with the children - playing, joking, laughing, tickling, and hiding - taught me that time is better spent with others in need. After all, isn't that what you would want someone else to do for you?

# Two Languages, One World Daniel Salazar

## 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.

I come from a culture where everything, from the language to the way one dances, is rhythmical. Everything flows freely in the mind, everything makes sense, and nothing is inhibited. I feel this sense of absolute free flow when I push the sole of my foot into the soft creamy-white carpet and turn on the music, to feel the lyrical sensation and soft rhythmical beat of Vallenato take over my body. I feel it especially when I open a book of Spanish literature, from the poems of Pablo Neruda to the magical reality of Gabriel Garcìa Màrquez.

When I entered the realm of English at age six, I felt the language as too rough, too stringent, filled with too many rules, with a comma here and a comma there. I thought that the literary, grammatical and syntactical rules of English inhibited the free flow of the mind. For me, English was like New York, with a perfect ninety degree angle between each street and avenue--too structural, while Spanish was like the streets of my native town of Medellin, Colombia, with a bunch of curves here and there, a kind of innate simplicity. Yet as the years progressed, I came to fully realize the importance of mixing these two languages and valuing diversity.

I remember my mom sitting on the living room couch when we had just moved in from Colombia. She had her untamed hair up in a bun and me upon her lap. We looked around the apartment. There was nothing, just white space. She had a weathered looking book full of poems beside her. She opened the book to a poem by Neruda, one accompanied by a picture of the calming sea, whose ripples kissed the sand. While I was transfixed on this picture, she recited the following words:

“Necesito del mar porque me enseña:

no sé si aprendo música o conciencia:

no sé si es ola sola o ser profundo…”

Although I didn’t understand the impact these words had at the time, the words were soothing in my seven year-old-heart. Her words were just like the waves of the sea, cascading from her mouth, coursing through me. Those words gave me a conciencia, a word that, when translated to English, I think, doesn’t carry the same emotion. The phrase with the closest meaning I can think of would be “an inner peace”. The reason I felt such inner peace was not only the way she recited the poem, but also the flow with which the Spanish phrases traveled to my ears. This was the way Neruda meant for them to be read. Spanish evokes vibrant human emotion: utter joy, excitement, and sincerity. Spanish is sustained by a flow of thought, and an understanding that everything is part of one vast existence.

English, on the other hand, with all of its structural elements, has forced me to accept that clarity is just as important as rhythm. It is just like math in the sense that it “shows” all of the steps. It is clear-cut and it makes sense. I think it doesn’t portray the natural flow of ideas as well as Spanish does; however, it does make one value the detail. It is that structure and detail that make me so vividly recall the war landscape in A Farewell to Arms and the gruesome death of Snowden in Catch-22, one of my favorite novels.

Each day I encounter both of these languages: Spanish at home and English at school. Each language compels me to put ideas in its own words. One day, I can sit in my chair and engulf myself in the world of English, reading books such as Miracles by C.S Lewis and discovering clarity about the existence of God. The next day, I can submerge my mind into the depths of Gabriel Garcìa Màrquez's Cien Años de Soledad. I feel blessed to know and appreciate the qualities of both literatures, both languages.