|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Sample essays 2017**

**Wellesley college**

**Oppression Syeddah Naqvi**

**Describe the world you come from — for example, your family, community or school — and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.**

The sweltering heat of the Middle Eastern sun would wrap its parched tongue around my heavily shrouded body. The afternoon could have been cooked on an open flame, leaving behind charred individuals busily going about their business. Despite such harsh weather, I remember constantly hugging my burka tightly around myself and searching for my mother and sisters amongst the masses of women in the same black garb. Being covered head to toe in black was a way of life for me, just like hiding my religious identity was or not seeing any women drivers anywhere. Malls and businesses would close for prayer time, and pork and alcohol were unknown. This is what my life was like just a few short years ago. I was born and spent the first nine years of my life in the country of Saudi Arabia. Now, almost a decade later, I have grown into a woman who has been carved out by the blunt and rugged landscape of Arabian life.

Living in Saudi Arabia, I belonged to a religious sect of Islam that made up less than 2% of the minority religious groups. The behemoth religious majority that we faced were the Islamic fanatics, the Wahabis, or people who believed in an extreme interpretation of religion and harshly reinforced religious law. There were always rumors of minority families being deported who got caught for practicing their faith. I remember having a constant fear of being exposed, a fear I had worked on pushing deep inside my heart as many others had to do too. Now when asked about my upbringing, I don’t hesitate to tell the truth. I want this same freedom for other minority groups, for those whose ideas aren’t given a second glance.

I believe all women have a sense of sisterhood for each other, and this inherent compassion is enhanced when we encounter oppression of basic human rights. In Saudi Arabia, women were severely oppressed and put on a much more subordinate position than men. Higher education opportunities for women were non-existent. We were forced to cover up all visible skin. Even in that nine year old girl’s brain, I knew how wrong it was that Mutawwas, extremist followers of the Islamic Law, pestered my mother to cover every inch of her face. Years of living in an atmosphere that forced me to keep my voice suppressed has only caused the proliferation of it. I have written articles and poems to better capture my memories and the raw emotions they elicit. I am also working on a blog focusing on the current accomplishments of the minority groups, mostly Saudi Arabian women who battle the laws of a strict social code and break through them. I believe in these people; I feel they are a part of me, and I a part of them. We are everywhere, finding solace in each others' achievements, and waiting for our own.

Foreigners were ineligible for government jobs, and enrollment in colleges and universities was a privilege for the few elite. Observing the Saudi Arabian monarchy and society and strict laws which are embraced by both have given me a motivation and made me approachable. My privileged education in an American International private school has infused a quality of open-mindedness. I met children from all over the world, exposing me to different views, norms, and ways of thinking. I am open to all sorts of perspectives, opinions, ideas, and religions and accepting of all types of people, and this trait is what made me apply to a University of California. I want to be able to freely utilize this different perspective in an accepting campus, and contribute a different setting in classrooms and incur in more dynamic discussions. I want to see justice served and watch women rise. I want to change the inequality that these women all over the world have been struck with and give them equal platforms to stand on. By living in Saudi Arabia, I have witnessed women being unable to express themselves; I want to raise public awareness of such oppression of rights for women, through my strengths in the arts of photography, writing, and publicly speaking. I want to engage in discussion and I believe that my different perspective will foster more thought and further promote more diverse opinions, as well as hearing the voice of the unheard which is my main goal.

**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 Wellesley Anonymous**

**When choosing a college, you are choosing an intellectual community and a place where you believe that you can live, learn, and flourish. To this end, the Board of Admission is interested in knowing your reasons for applying to Wellesley College and how Wellesley will help you to realize your personal and academic goals.**

The alarm clock rang furiously at six-thirty in the morning. Impatiently turning it off, I realized I had a horrible stomachache. The women's choir had been preparing for weeks on end for this concert at Wellesley College and there was no way I would miss it. It's a good thing I didn't. After spending a night at Wellesley College with members of the choir, I knew that this was the place for me. Even through two days of sickness, I was able to get a sense of what kinds of women attend Wellesley. These women are creative, determined, but most of all, they are individuals. This is exactly the kind of woman I strive to be.

Because of one night with the choir and many conversations with my sister, I have come to the conclusion that discussing current events is a very common thing at Wellesley, whether it is about politics, entertainment, or religion. This is the perfect place and opportunity for me to realize my ambitions and opinions as a young woman, and to learn to support my own beliefs. Wellesley is an environment where women are not afraid to speak their minds, but they do so with great modesty.

After spending almost four years in a public high school with nearly fifteen-hundred students, one can lose some of the individual attention from teachers that may help one's success, or the competitiveness that prepares one for the real world. At Wellesley, all of these advantages can be renewed. Because I hold a strong interest in psychology and other scientific studies, I am looking for a college like Wellesley that has a strong science program. With professors that are solely dedicated to teaching undergraduates, it provides the guidance and attention that every student needs to fully succeed. With all of these characteristics, I will be able to realize my academic goals of becoming a psychiatrist, surgeon or pediatrician. If I find another interest in the course of my four years in college, Wellesley, one of the top liberal arts colleges in the nation, can provide me with the chance to explore other subjects without difficulties. It is a place where I will not be afraid to take risks.

Throughout high school, I have always strived to maintain a balance between academics and extracurricular activities, such as music and sports. At Wellesley, I will have the chance to incorporate these special aspects of my life into my goals of developing my individualism within a strong community. Music has always played a large role in my life, from taking piano lessons, leading an a capella group, participating in the high school choir, and writing and recording my own compositions. I never intend to lose my connection with music, and Wellesley can help me with the opportunity to realize how serious I want to go with my vocal interests and piano playing with its several acapella groups, Wellesley College Choir, and many other student groups.

In addition to music, sports are activities that I have always participated in since I was in kindergarten. Even though I have no intention of taking sports to a professional level, Wellesley presents many different athletic choices. With a strong passion to continue playing tennis somewhat competitively, I have the option of competing at a varsity level, or opting to simply use the plethora of sports facilities available. Students have also organized intramural sports in order to sustain athletic interests. I will be able to keep myself physically as well as mentally fit.

Wellesley is the place where I can be guided, and also taught to develop a sense of individualism to realize and fulfill all my aspirations.

**Finding My Faith Anonymous**

**Personal statement for the common application.**

A year and a day’s journey lay ahead of every fabled knight in search of the ever elusive Holy Grail, and if said knight was deemed worthy to find it, exhaustion would cause him to sleep at the feet of the Grail without ever truly seeing it. And while medieval grail legends are fiction, to this day people argue about the grail’s true nature. Most recently, Dan Brown’s novel The Da Vinci Code put the limelight back on the ‘alternative’ history as portrayed by Gnostic Gospels and guess work. In retaliation, the orthodoxy condemned the book, and sparked an interest in the matter that consumed an entire summer of private research. From my late nights of reading, I just became entirely lost in what was fiction and what wasn’t; but I did tend to side with the less spoken for side of the story.

Part of the reason why I like the controversy of alternative history is that I don’t approve of the organized manifestation of religion, churches. It is clear to me that the root of the problem is that in order to keep multitudes of people believing the same thing, the powers that be have to be strict about conformity to the message. But something gets in the way of that, it’s commonly called personal faith. When enough people’s personals faiths are very similar they like to start their own churches, and if it happens a lot, it gets coined a Reformation. But it is here faith can get lost. A wise friend once told me, “no two people can really worship exactly the same God” Likewise, two people cannot see Jesus in exactly the same way. That is why monotheistic religions took longer to develop than polytheistic religions did. In the ancient civilizations, there were gods and goddesses for almost everything. People prayed to what was important to them. With the rise of the one true God, problems arose. First, if both sides of a conflict believe in the one true God, how can either side be the worthy cause? Also, if something in one’s personal life has gone awry, how will the one God have time for small issues? This is why there are patron saints for just about everything now. Still, churches eliminate the need for any kind of substantial personal faith. If you need a group of people or a book to tell you how to feel, or what to believe than you lack faith.

My faith is basic. I believe that things happen for a reason, and if I do something wrong I will get punished for it, and if I do something right I’ll get rewarded for it. I believe that I am not in control of everything and must to my best to respect those things that I cannot control that are greater than me, Nature, or whatever else that power may be. Because I have trust in what I believe, alternative histories don’t shake the religious ground on which I walk.

**Why Wellesley Anonymous**

**"When choosing a college, you are not only choosing an intellectual community but also a place where you believe that you can live, learn and flourish. To this end, the Board of Admission is interested in knowing your reasons for applying to Wellesley College and how you feel Wellesley will help you to realize your personal and academic goals."**

When I was first compiling my college list, I was resistant to the idea of including Wellesley. I was in the group of people who didn’t like the idea of college eithout y-chromosomes. For me, it wasn’t a social issue; I can have fun with whoever is willing. Instead, I feared four years of my sophomore winter all-girl English class. Within twenty minutes of class starting, all twelve girls had exhausted our ideas or come to a place of complete agreement. It was boring. I have since come to look at Wellesley again because of how happy my Exeter alumnae friends are when they visit, and because of my interest in continuing to row in college in a competitive while not unnecessarily stressful environment.

Regardless of my love for the sport, I knew there would be more to my college experience than rowing. I have to graduate in something. The academic program that has most held my interest in Wellesley is the exchange program with MIT. While I am thoroughly looking forward to a well-rounded (with some extra history and religion) liberal arts education that I can get at Wellesley, the budding biochemist nestled in my brain keeps whispering about MIT being so near and how excellent taking intensive science courses would be. I’ve decided that my little scientist is right, that going to Wellesley will put me in a position where I can find out what I want to do and pursue it, and if I don’t make a definite decision as to my ultimate goals, I will be able to pursue them when I do.

**Joy Anonymous**

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

One hundred sixty-two days ago I was counting the days I had left to live. “Impression: Large right ovarian mass with cystic appearance periphery and solid tumor in the center…” I trembled as I heard every word of the MRI report that my mom had tried to hide from me. What? “Most likely cancerous.” The answer reaffirmed itself in the seven diagnosis reports by seven different doctors. A grip of ice froze me to the core. I bit my lips to force myself not to shudder, as I filed the reports back in my mom’s drawer.

My eyes were glued open as I stared hopelessly into the emptiness of each night, waiting to wake up from this cruel nightmare. But I didn’t. I wasn’t dreaming. Everything I valued in my life had suddenly become trivial to me, for my whole life was slipping away. I understood why my mom had tried to persuade me to stop practicing volleyball or studying for the SAT. And it was clear why my mom had suggested that I should spend the two days before surgery donating my savings and favorite clothes: she knew that this could have been my last chance to do so. And despite shivering deeply upon the word ‘death’, all I could do was to hold my tongue and accept it.

While my mom and my brothers ran up and down the hospital, requesting the safest method for my surgery the next morning, I prayed. Left alone on the frigid bed of the hospital room, I picked up a small Bible that was sitting beside the remote control, as though I were a Christian and the waiting Bible was mine to be read. I didn’t know anything about God, but in the very first page I turned to, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” It seemed awkward and futile for a Buddhist to pray, but in those last moments of my life, all I had left to hope for was to believe in believing; believing that a miracle would happen.

Being wheeled into the operating room, I smiled, holding back my tears as my family reassured me, although I knew I might not return. I slipped into unconsciousness. As the whirlwind pushed me into the darkening abyss, somehow I held on tightly to that glittering ray of hope. After eight hours of surgery, I awoke to hear my surgeon exclaiming in astonishment, “She had that one-in-a-million chance that the MRI report had projected an inaccurate cystic appearance!” A miracle had happened.

I did not know if my prayers really made God take away the cancerous cyst. And even if it was not God, I was lucky; very lucky to be given a new life.

With the same curiosity that led me to read the MRI report, I decided to go to church for the first time. To my surprise, the warm welcome and passionate smiles I received completely disarmed the anticipated anxiety of being in an unfamiliar situation. My new friends’ honesty, unconditional compassion, and eagerness to help people who they have not even seen, are contrasting to the familiar societal competition within even close friends who fight over honors or wealth. There, though I have not found an absolute answer as to whether God is my life savior, I have been introduced to a true happiness. And this happiness gives me more than enough reason to be engaged in the church community service activities.

My wound is now reduced to a dried scar, which still cautions me to remember that I could have died or been undergoing chemotherapy and become a lifelong burden for my old mother. Most importantly, the experience reminds me not only that I am very lucky, but also that many people are not as lucky as I. Now that I have been given my chance, it is my turn to give.

Sixteen Sundays ago, I persuaded my family and new friends at church to visit patients at national cancer institutes. I felt ashamed for ever being so selfish, never having tried to understand these patients; instead I had been bored when I was invited to these kinds of community service experiences. I once thought that it was impossible for someone like me, who aims for excellence and success, to have enough time for such activities. I did not believe that just visiting patients could be any help, because we could not lengthen their lives. But now, I understand that a day I can devote to them cannot be compared to a second of happiness felt by patients who are living with cancer. Seeing the faces of despairing patients being cheered momentarily by my visits has inspired me to be there every weekend. Every night, I pray for these patients to be able to confront the inevitable, peacefully. I am blessed to have feared the same, for without experiencing it, I would never have been able to appreciate the happiness of giving.

At school, I find myself smiling at my former rivals, because just being able to go to school was more than I had ever hoped for 162 days ago. No longer do I face the life-threatening necessity to always be the top student in class. I didn’t recover quickly enough for the volleyball season this year, but cheering on the bench was enough for me because a new member was in tears when she learned there was an unoccupied position. This experience has changed my definition of success, extending it beyond the means of my academic transcript, to the joy of being alive and the joy of giving.

# Diverse Identity Anonymous

**Common Application essay on diversity**

“Dinner is ready!” Every Sunday a member of our family takes a turn choosing what we’re having for dinner, and today was my turn. My mother had prepared all of my favorite food, from foie gras to sea urchin sushi to satay. As we began eating, my mother asked me her favorite question: “What did you get on your tests this week?” I answered proudly, knowing that I studied the materials thoroughly and did well.

My mother then smirked, “Mostly good, but an A- in history? When I got an A-, my father would hit my hands with a ruler.”

“She tried her best, keep it up.” said my Father.

“This is why Indonesia never progresses, everyone lacks rigor. When my grandfather was here during colonization, he said the people were so lazy...” babbled my mother, and the conversation continued. It was the usual back-and-forth discussion caused by their opposing backgrounds, personalities, and values. After we finished dinner and did our Islamic prayers, my mother brought us to her room to thank our Japanese ancestors. My household was like a Chex party mix – a combination of many things.

Growing up in an environment filled with conflicting ideas taught me to be open minded: I am never afraid to try new things, to meet new people, to consider different ideologies, and to take advantage of random opportunities.

Sure, a part of me is similar to the typical teenage girl (I listen to Lady Gaga, and I like to talk about fashion) but another part is much more than that. I never limit myself to anything. For instance, when shopping for a 30 Rock poster, I came across a Miles Davis vinyl. I bought it, and now I listen to his albums everyday. Inspired by the movie New York Gangster, I taught myself how to throw knives, which resulted in a broken door and an angry mother. I also taught myself how to play the flute and create DJ mixes. Over time, I have become so multifaceted that often even my close friends state, "You still manage to surprise me."

Not only am I open to new things, I am also open to new people. While I am friends with many students from different cliques, I am also very close to faculty and staff throughout the school. I became good friends with Niño, our cafeteria’s cook, and I customized a stir-fry sauce that he then named after me – a sauce that my math teacher was addicted to and, once she met me, thought fit me perfectly.

Sometimes my impartiality gets me in trouble. For example in my Islamic elementary school, I got a week of detention for reading The Da Vinci Code and being curious about “dangerous Christian values.” Situations like this made me realize how lucky I am to have been exposed to different values and to have the courage to let myself learn new things. This tendency did not come out of the blue, but was a result of my upbringing that served diversity on a silver platter to me. Without it, I wouldn't have the will to read and contemplate the Qur’an and Nietzsche’s opposing thoughts. Without it, I wouldn't have the thirst to push my boundaries, leave my comfort zone, and enthusiastically embrace the diversity of experiences and people I will encounter in college. Without it, I wouldn't be me.

**Wellesley and Me Anonymous**

**The Board of Admission is interested in knowing your reasons for applying to Wellesley College and how Wellesley will help you to realize your personal and academic goals. (In two paragraphs)**

After riding my bicycle around campus to start off the morning, I return to Cazenova Hall to prepare for the day. I leave my dorm and make my way to the Lulu to meet a couple of my friends for breakfast. We met when we were only freshmen at Professor Marini’s seminar on Radical Individualism and the Common Good. Because of the small size of the class and our shared concerns about starting college life, we quickly became good friends. As we catch up, my friend tells me about her plan to conduct research with the guidance of the Wellesley Center For Women. She asks me for input because I was involved in the Women in Public Service Summer Institute last June. After breakfast, I make my way to Professor Marshall’s Philosophy of Religion class. I was introduced to existentialism in my high school philosophy course, and, from then on, I have always wanted to further explore the question of the nature of religion and God. In the class, we read passages from Thus Spoke Zarathustra. It is my second encounter with Nietzsche, and now, I have a clearer sense of his viewpoint. Afterwards, I go to the Clapp library to meet my writing tutor. I am starting my senior thesis in economics, and I am having trouble with my outline. My senior thesis, which is on the need for affirmative action in Indonesia's workforce, is inspired by the theories I learned over the past few years in Professor Lindauer’s Development Economics class, Professor Witte’s Law and Economics class, and Professor De Bres’s Social and Political Philosophy class. After making some progress, I finish my session and quickly go to practice with The Wellesley College Sailing Team. I always wanted to learn to sail and embraced the opportunity when i came to Wellesley. Even though I have only been sailing for three years, I now consider myself a decent sailor. As we end our practice at the Charles River, we decide to have dinner at Bartley’s in Cambridge. There, the team ends the day with much laughter and many delicious burgers.

When I visited Wellesley’s campus this summer and walked around the beautiful Alexandra Botanic Garden, these are the images I saw when I thought of what a day would be at Wellesley - intellectually engaging, but also filled with much strong camaraderie of smart and kind women. What I find most appealing about Wellesley is that it is a liberal arts college with the resources of a major university. I think of Wellesley as a close-knit community where I can focus on my passion while exploring the various opportunities at my fingertips. At Wellesley, I know that I would always be able find support when I need it, both academically and socially. At Wellesley, I know that I would feel at home.

**Why Wellesley? Anonymous**

**Why Wellesley? What attracts you about Wellesley?**

Our Socratic reading group is the ultimate unconventional cult, nine curious high schoolers and a college professor gathering every weekend to discuss the practicality of anarchy, the life of the mind, and the cosmological divine. Here, I learned things my school curriculum couldn’t teach me: how to break down an independent film philosophically, how to make the perfect latte, how scan a second-hand bookstore and spot that dust-covered Greek tragedy. Soon, I knew I didn’t just want any liberal-arts college, but one with specifically designed interdisciplinary programs fusing literature and art. I’m constantly intrigued by mediums of story-telling: graphic novels, films, musicals. Equally fascinated with form, with the infinite architecture of human visual art, I want to construct dialogues between people and places. Through Wellesley’s art department and English major’s creative writing concentration, I hope to thoroughly explore cinematographic screenwriting and illustration, a world where I can bridge the gap between literature and design.

And my vision of art does not stop there. As a student, I’ve traveled extensively, deeply fascinated by hotel décor, the spiraling bird installations, cubist-inspired couches under dim light. Design engulfs us, unconsciously altering our existence. When did kitsch trends begin to dominate the aesthetics of my generation? I was passionately discussing this with a Wellesley alumnus when she told me, that with the intensity in which I like to observe contemporary patterns, I’d enjoy Wellesley’s interdepartmental program that combines media studies and studio art.

After two campus visits and extensive research, I found that many of the cutting-edge courses in Wellesley’s studio arts major resonated with my current interests. I began to dream that, as a freshman, I could take Professor Berman’s *Persuasive Images* course and look into how the artist’s role has changed in the context of globalized art circulation. At Wellesley, I’ll be constantly inspired by the on-campus Davis Museum, the expansive workspaces, and Boston’s myriad art galleries. The flexible structure of Wellesley’s concentrations would not only allow me to combine my interests in Eastern poetics with media-design, but also explore literary traditions to elevate the depth of my work. Besides academics, I look forward to initiating Wellesley’s very first Poetry Slam, ultimately performing in the Jewett Arts Center and interning at Counterpoint or national Slate Magazine. Immersed in the creative, professional atmosphere here at Wellesley, I’ll be able to fully express my ideas, to connect with an audience which has yet to take its seat and, perhaps, to embolden and affect them someday.

**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.

**The Power of Reading Lillian Pearl Potter**

**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 cannon-balled into reading in first grade and have not emerged to catch my breath yet. Reading is the medium through which I grow. Books have swept me light years and alternate realties away, but have always returned me with more understanding of my world and others than when I left.

There is always a book tucked in my purse, backpack, or under my arm. Reading is my simplest, most adored pleasure. I love when a combination of words is so fresh that you look at the topic with a different understanding. I love when I pick up a book that articulates the singularities of the teenage experience so perfectly. I love when an author writes my own fears, challenges, or corroborates my ideals, and stretches my imagination to push breath and color into characters. With a strong imagination and a good book I can slip out of my skin and into any life I want, no matter how improbable. Books can also be a connection to and a celebration of life, not necessarily an escape from it. I read with the intent of learning. Books expand my world, every description coloring my view of a person, place, or way of life. When I read about a Jewish girl confined to her neighbor’s attic, it is not because I don’t want to be Lilly; it is because I want to understand Anne and her world. I want to explore every experience, understand every point of view, no matter how different from my own. My world is never dulled or muted after reading; it is only enhanced by my new knowledge and the fresh perspective I have to view it through.

I realize that even though there is a lot of inequity in this world, with books I have a powerful ally as I try to influence change. At Banneker Elementary, a local school, I participated in *Reading Under the Stars*. My friends acted out the scenes of children’s books while I narrated. We saw little, rapt faces staring up at us from pillows and heard the screams of “Again! Another!” Seeing how much our young audience enjoyed it, I wanted to help others have the same opportunities to grow and learn through reading. I walked with my friends in a charity event to support the organization *A Room to Read*, and we raised enough funds to build a library at a small all-girls school in Africa. I researched different nonprofits that supplied books to underprivileged schools, women’s shelters, prisons, and homeless shelters. I organized a book drive at my school and scoured thrift stores and church sales for inexpensive books. Through donations of books and money (and the painful gutting of my own shelves) I was able to surpass my original goal of 500 books, ultimately donating 1,300 books to Books for America.

While I will never know what happened with the books I donated, I do know that each book has the possibility of pivoting someone’s life in a different direction. I take something away from every book I read. The more knowledge I accumulate through reading, the more powerful I feel. It is my hope that the recipients of the donated books are sparked with the same confidence and continue to return to books as I do for fun, adventure, wisdom, and especially the pursuit of knowledge.

**A Meaningful Place Sophie Lis**

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

The soft reminder of warm light, the neat rows of novels and biographies and volumes of poetry against mahogany shelves back to back in a literary continuum… I walk further into Barnes and Noble. Swim in circles around the small brown tables in the center, feel the raised letters of the titles wedged under ‘Books That Make You Think’. I’ve been here a thousand times before and yet still feel the exhilarating serenity of the quiet hum of people, the stacks of unread books, the particular excitement of the aroma of anticipated coffee, each trip a unique euphoria and different exhilaration. I have been here since I was five years old, since my mom let me loose in the children’s section, still jumping and peering and feeling the hard indention of the unbent spines stacked definitely on same, if not higher, wooden shelves.

I walk diagonally and make zigzags, crane my neck, peering curiously at the fresh copy of *Harry*Potter; experience the illumination of the Great Hall, the swish and flick of wands, the heavy familiarity of the white waiting pages. Jump to get at Sylvia Plath’s evasive *Ariel*, perched high on the top shelf where only the tips of my fingers graze. *Ariel* is especially important to me. When I first came pushing home with it, red-cheeked and adolescent-awkward, I was fourteen. Feeling my way, blindly, through the frightening reality of high school and coming of age, I leafed through it at night, my small lamp perched precariously in the dark. I discovered very new, and very different ideas. The idea of the radical housewife, inherent feminist, I saved dog-eared and bookmarked, the poem *Lesbos* a new and interesting perspective. I didn’t understand what feminism was and was shocked and stimulated to see it so bluntly manifested in the poem.

Only later, after the catalyst of *Ariel* did I render its full significance, unaware of the importance activism and equality would have for me later on. This kind of literature ushered me past the quiet, safe teenage fiction I had been engrossed in, leading dangerously and provocatively into new territory. For me, books like *Ariel* are important not only as a result of their convincing stories but also because they shaped me in all my totality and complexity as a human being. It is important to be able to understand others, a skill that is typed and sealed in the form of a novel. Since then, when I discovered history, literature, and poetry, and then history and literature and poetry in the same book, I have not left. Literature, engrained in my life as enduringly as the lines on the back of my hands, has changed and bettered me, causing me to be not only more aware, but significantly better-rounded. It has introduced me to history, philosophy, bettered my vocabulary, made me a more adept writer, and become my most luxurious pastime. What’s more, I found my safe haven, away from the loud and running world in my two hundred pages of print, bound, typed, and delivered in the form of an escape and a passion that has wholly transformed my interests and personality.

I feel that books are a universal medium of understanding, connecting people of all denominations, creeds, and ideas. They incite the excitement and security not exclusive only to myself but those in all history of readers who have enjoyed and reveled in the same literary comforts as I, and experienced the very similar ache and desire for understanding and learning.

**Shark Fin Soup Anonymous**

**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.**

“One shark fin soup, please,” he said, avoiding my glare and grinning back at my two brothers, too young to know any better.

I’ve protested, debated, and shared article after article with my dad about the consequences of shark finning, but Chinese tradition won out. The pride I have for my culture curdles at its resistance to modern morality. I love the grounded, tenacious, spirit that my heritage bears: nothing, my dad hammered into me, can be achieved without sweat on my brow. Yet at that moment, all I felt was a mixture of disappointment, exasperation, and anger. There is little culinary value in a bowl of shark fin; it only represents a segment of Chinese values we’ve clung on to in spite of the damages it creates.

I’m immersed in an environment where technology and the economy zoom ahead but societal norms prefer to stay rooted. What I see as critical ethical issues are treated as violations of the values we’re so proud of. This extends to topics beyond shark fin. In a Polytechnic University survey, more than half of the participants disagreed with teaching students that "both homosexual and heterosexual love is beautiful" - explaining why such a modern city like Hong Kong has yet to recognise same sex marriage.

“Why would they show something like this on TV?” My dad banged his cup down on the dinner table. A man proudly waves a rainbow flag as a young woman and her girlfriend embrace in the background. My brothers soaked up every jeering comment my dad made, joking and giggling with each other.

My heart sunk further. Was it a surprise that their reaction mirrored my dad’s attitude? It was all they’d ever known. Even at my own high school, I witness the same narrow perspective echo amongst my peers. My choice to consume a wider range of media has exposed me to issues and information about LGBT+ which is rarely mentioned in Hong Kong’s channels. Mainstream discussion of LGBT+ is largely condescending or comedic; otherwise, it is awkward and avoided. This has made it frustrating to explain why I found some of my friends and family’s comments inappropriate.

There was a need for a safe, constructive, educational platform for LGBT+ topics to be discussed. I wished for my brothers to be exposed to more than my dad’s antiquated attitudes. I wanted my peers to gain a broader perspective of LGBT+.

Hence, I teamed up with a few like-minded students to form Diversify. We approached our school’s administration to create a Year 12 pastoral session for LGBT+ education within the curriculum. We hoped to foster a more understanding, open and welcome environment through education and more constructive discussion.

We realised there were two levels to this. First, to inform: dispelling misconceptions and examining relevant issues of today. Second, to share: engaging in discussion and hopefully, reflection. It was also essential to talk to LGBT+ students for their perspective to ensure our lesson plan’s portrayal of of LGBT+ issues was appropriate and fair. No matter what people thought afterwards, I saw it as a success if they reflected on the fundamental reasoning of their views and ended up with a more informed opinion.

As excited as I was, I was nervous to see the feedback. What would be the worst case scenario? My friends and classmates lashing out against the session, calling it a waste of time and distasteful. Or apathy? Our preparation and research ignored. I could see how easy it is to turn a blind eye to such issues which rarely get attention in this city.

But then, Orlando.

After weeks of planning, the significance of the session suddenly settled in. The deeply disturbing event had sparked a serious conversation worldwide, including the cold classrooms of 145 Hong Kong students.