

Essays That Worked

What does the Admissions Committee look for in a successful essay? It's one of our most commonly asked questions.

Since the essay is an important part of the application process, the Admissions Committee has selected four examples of essays that worked, written by members of the Johns Hopkins Class of 2014. These essays represent just four examples of essays we found impressive and helpful during the past admissions cycle.

These "essays that worked" are distinct and unique to the individual writer; however, each of them assisted the admissions reader in learning more about the student beyond the transcripts and activity sheets. We hope these essays inspire you as you prepare to compose your own personal statements. The most important thing to remember is to be original and creative as you share your own story with us.

Rachel C.

Hometown: Wynnewood, PA

Intended majors: Writing Seminars/Political Science

My Best Kept Secret

For a year, we had something special.

It wasn't big. It wasn't flashy. But it meant a lot to me.

Welcome to JTOP: an arcane collectivity within the walls of Lower Merion High School. JTOP stands for Justin Timberlake Operation Project, an opaque title chosen to baffle anyone who might overhear us mention the organization.

I was inducted as the fifth member in November of 2008, joining Maggie, Jake, Patricia and Sarah. At the time, I knew no one in this coterie but Jake, who provided me with little information. He insisted that I would find meaning in the group—that together we would be able to channel our restless frustration and curiosity into something worthwhile—but that I must first be sworn to secrecy. I was dubious, nervous, and excited.

Okay. Okay. This is peculiar right? I'm not from Hogwarts, I'm not some top-secret CIA operative—I'm just a girl from a suburb of Philadelphia... right? And what did "JTOP" even do?

That question cannot be answered so easily. JTOP was a chance for bright kids who love learning...to explore. Every meeting, every task, every debate felt like a new adventure.

One day Maggie came home from school and informed us of hearing about trepanation, the practice of cutting holes into one's skull. This was creepy... yet fascinating. Why would anyone willfully drill a hole into his or her head? What would that be like? So on a Wednesday night, after we finished our homework, we furtively gathered and watched a documentary that Maggie purchased entitled "Hole in Your Head," all about the history of trepanation.

Once we decided to make "circle poetry" for other students whom we admired throughout the school. Some of the students we didn't know personally—just respected from afar. Taking a black Sharpie and ripping out pages from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, we began to circle words and letters creating personalized messages. I wrote a poem for Hannah, a girl I knew only through her insightful comments in English class. Hannah had lately been bemoaning that she was turning jaded by the stressful experience of junior year. I wrote that she shouldn't let the school system break her and that her infectious enthusiasm is too important to be replaced by cynicism. When we finished, JTOP looked up the recipients' addresses in the phone book, drove to the various homes and anonymously deposited the poems into each of their mailboxes.

Once we all attended a school board meeting at which our district was considering proposed changes to the high school grading policy. I stood up and made a speech before the administrators, teachers and community on the defects of the proposal. Another time we found ourselves sitting in a coffee shop trying to figure out if we were stuck on an island which mix of 20 people from our school would we need along with us in order to survive. Another time we clandestinely met at an out-of-the-way Chinese restaurant (JTOP avoids locations where we could be likely spotted) and, over egg rolls, debated the merits of biological determinism. Patricia, a fierce advocate of Richard Dawkins, battled Maggie and me, advocates of environmental factors also playing a fundamental role in pushing genetic "limits."

We decided we needed an adult figure within our organization so we divulged the details of our club to Mohsen Ghodsi, our old 9th grade gifted support teacher, and asked that he serve as our mentor. He was enthusiastic in his support. He not only allowed us to hold JTOP meetings in his classroom during free periods but also supplied us with book titles and journal articles that he felt might interest us.

We went creek-walking. We cooked homemade dumplings. We gave opera music a try. We debated the injustice of calling "shotgun" in the passenger seat of a car. Once, we decided to write "JTOP" on all the dollar bills we owned in the hope that some day, years from now, they might come back to us in currency recirculation.

In June I decided to read Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. The novel describes an idealistic young girl starting her freshman year at a prestigious university, who is recruited for an intellectual discussion club with an opaque misleading name—The Millennial Mutants. The resemblance between Charlotte Simmons' club and JTOP was uncanny.

I realized though, it wasn't mere coincidence that Tom Wolfe described a society similar to JTOP. And, importantly, the parallels did not make me feel generic. To the contrary, they made me feel like I was a part of something much bigger. Something universal. It was exciting to think about people living "the life of the mind" elsewhere, in different schools and states and perhaps in secret clubs of their own. The notion that there are many people out there who band together in the free pursuit of ideas and experiences was comforting and validating.

Maybe it all sounds trivial. Perhaps intelligent students shouldn't be "wasting their time" writing acronyms on dollars and instead direct more focus to investing time into an internship or "getting ahead." But I disagree. When I look back on my junior year I feel lucky to have received such a precious experience.

Where is JTOP now you might ask? Well, we're all still friends, but the club definitely lost its fire over the summer, and I can't really predict what the future holds for it. But, that's okay. Just having been able to experience unfettered adolescent discovery, with people who have the same interests as I, is something that I believe really matters. And knowing that I'm not alone, and that others out there are also exploring—well that matters too. And knowing that I'll meet many more people in college who share the same passions, well that's the most exciting prospect of all.

Admissions Reader Comments

This essay worked because it managed to show different facets of the student's personality through a single, unifying theme (the JTOP club). For me, this demonstrated the student's interest in exploring the world simply for the pleasure of learning new ideas. It showed that the student wanted to cheer on classmates and was willing to stand up and defend ideas she believed in. And it was quirky! Not everyone wants to sit around a circle debating the merits of calling "shotgun" (which I am a fan of—still), but that's what makes her different and an individual.

—Dana Messinger, Assistant Director of Admissions

Bridget H.

Hometown: Boise, ID

Intended majors: Latin American Studies/Behavioral Biology

Cinco Reasons Why I am Interested in Pursuing Latin American Studies and One Reason Why I am Not

Cinco) I'm still waiting for my Neruda—a man who likes me when I'm silent.

Cuatro) I'm in the kitchen again, arranging marriages between egg yolks. Keeping track of the time in order to determine how much longer I can realistically put off studying for tomorrow's calculus test.

My extreme days of baking happen every few weeks, or whenever a birthday rolls around in our Spanish class. I am the cake guru. I am always trying new recipes, adding new things to the box mixes I buy in twos and threes at the self check out at the grocery.

In Mexico, our teacher tells us, they have a tradition of making a small cake, in addition to a regular cake. The large cake is for the guests to eat. The small cake is for the guests to push the birthday person's face into while chanting 'Que Muerde.' Take a bite.

Our class always forgets exactly what the phrase is. We get confused and start chanting 'Que Muerte.' That Death. Or once, a boy started chanting 'Torta Cara'—which means face cake.

Welcome to first period AP Spanish.

Tres) It deeply upsets me that neither the Wall Street Journal nor the Idaho Statesman seem to publish many articles relating to Latin America. I've taken to reading the New York Times, online, over sunny-side eggs on Sara Lee toast.

Dos) I learned how to 'Baile Tipico' the summer before my junior year in High School.

The Gods were making soup in the Panamanian Jungle, which meant that the water pipes were always overflowing, and I was lucky if my shower consisted of something other than bucket collected rainwater, self poured over my sticky torso.

But bucket or no, every Friday was dance lesson day, and I'd wade through whatever broth lay simmering in the soccer field between my house and the dance studio. There I'd stand in sandals, amongst the chickens, while a large woman pushed Spanish through the gaps in her teeth. Vaguely I was aware that this was my signal to attempt to dance.

They called me 'Rubia'. Blonde. Mainly because their tongues get angry when they try to make the harsh 'i' sound that comes after the 'r' in my name. Eventually, even I couldn't say my name right. The letter 'i' scratched and gnawed at the insides of my cheeks on the way out. My name had gotten soggy and disintegrated in the Latin American rainstorms.

Since my return, my mouth has again become accustomed to the 'i' sound. America runs on the letter 'i' more than it runs on Dunkin' Donuts. Yet, I still retain the knowledge of 'Baile Tipico'. It has been a year and I still haven't fully unpacked. My whole world was shaken when I learned to shake my hips, and now there's nothing that can keep me still.

Uno) In Spanish the word for popcorn translates literally to 'Small Doves'. The word 'esperar' means both 'to wait' and 'to hope'. The word equivocarse, or to make a mistake, is beautiful and makes my toes curly against each other in a happy way.

However, sometimes I wonder, because...

One) Latin American Studies is not Creative Writing.

Admissions Reader Comments

Bridget is a terrific writer. Even her title makes me eager to jump right into her essay. She conveys a genuine curiosity about Latin American culture and a love for writing. Bridget uses salient details to elaborate on these two academic interests, her topic of choice. Whether discussing the coverage of Latin America in main stream American publications or vividly describing her experience learning "Baile Tipico," she paints a distinctive picture that leaves the reader wanting to know more. One of my favorite examples follows: "My whole world was shaken when I learned to shake my hips, and now there's nothing that can keep me still."

—Chloe Rothstein, Assistant Director of Admissions

Andrew T.
Hometown: Andover, MA
Intended majors: Writing Seminars / German

Speak

Count to twenty. Now imagine walking into Starbucks. As you make your way up to the counter, the delicate smell of brewing coffee arouses your senses. You politely ease your way through the herd of people gathered in front of the register and meet the eyes of the cashier. She acknowledges your presence with a slight nod as irritable grunts set in around you. You open your mouth to begin speaking, but nothing comes out. Silence. You continue to stand there, lips spread wide. Embarrassment overtakes you as the herd glares in your direction. The cashier remains motionless, unsure of how to cope with the silence. As time stretches onwards, your cheeks burn with shame. The herd begins to giggle uneasily, and some even go as far as to point. Twenty seconds pass before you are able to break the silence with a mumbled, "M-M-M-M-May I h-h-have a g-g-grande l-l-l-latte?" With an awkward smile, the cashier reaches for your gift card, and you retreat with your head tucked deep into your chest.

It was moments like these that made me truly ashamed of who I was. Ever since the age of six, I have stuttered. And before I traveled to Munich this past summer, I wished every morning that I would wake up without my stutter. I would often avoid answering the phone, even conversing with my family, anything to abstain from speaking. I was terrified of what other people would think of me when I stuttered, and so in an attempt to escape humiliation, I would simply keep quiet. Yet, I could no longer live my life running from the opportunities I so fervently desired to experience. I craved to be myself, to do the things that I wanted to do, regardless of my stutter. And so I gathered the courage to spend three weeks alone in Germany.

When my plane landed in Munich, my host mother came barreling into my arms. The amount of joy in her hug overwhelmed me. I had been with her for less than a minute and already I was a part of her life. What truly grabbed me however, was the way she introduced herself. While still embracing me, she squeaked, "Hello! My name is Monica, and I stutter." My heart stopped. The first words out of her mouth were the ones I feared the most. When she stepped back to look at me, I could not take my eyes off of her smile. She did not have a hint of shame in her voice. She was proud to be a stutterer.

The courage glistening in her eyes inspired me more than the words of any speech therapist or supportive friend. I always knew I had the will inside of me to accept my stuttering, but it took the simple encouragement of another stutterer for me to finally make peace with it. Witnessing her dignity increased my own self-respect. I believed in myself more than ever before. From those simple words, I learned that I am who I am, and that I need to embrace and welcome it. I realized that without my stutter, I would not have nearly the amount of perseverance, optimism, or integrity that I have today, as these qualities allow me to remain positive during the long beats of silence. They are what make me unique, and if I must stutter in order to possess them, then I would stand silent in Starbucks forever.

Before I went to Germany, I had always wanted to give a tour to a prospective student visiting Phillips Academy. I was afraid, however, that my stutter would prevent me from giving the enthusiastic tour that the school deserves. I was terrified that I would not be able to relay my love for Andover accurately, and as a result, would turn the prospective family away. But after realizing how proud I am to be myself, I confidently marched up to the Admissions building. I wanted to share my courage with those around me. I would not be ashamed. I would finally be the person I desired to be. I would do the things that I love to do, the things that make me happy. And as I approached the prospective student that I was about to tour, I extended my hand and smiled, "Hi! My name is Andrew, and I stutter."

Admissions Reader Comments

Andrew's essay worked for me because he was able to provide me, the reader, an open window to all the emotions and struggles he faces living with his stutter. From the scene at Starbucks, to meeting his host mother in Munich, and his first campus tour, each story is detailed and personal and reveals so much about Andrew's strength of character. His voice is evident throughout the entire essay and the personal nature of what he chooses to reveal assisted me in gaining a true understanding of the type of individual he is and will be. The qualities that Andrew presents in his essay are qualities we look for when learning more about our applicants.

—Daniel Creasy, Associate Director of Admissions

Mark S.

Hometown: Cambria, CA

Intended majors: Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering

Mark Stuczynski, Superhero

Pink cape. Pink boots. Goggles devised from an airline sleeping mask. The hardest part about growing up overseas was that more often than not, my only friends were the ones I could summon from my imagination. My childhood compatriots consisted of a motley crew of superheroes: Spiderman, Batman, Superman, and occasionally some Power Rangers. At around age two, I learned that a superhero's costume indicated what sort of powers he had. At age four, after trying to fly, I came to the conclusion that a superhero's power didn't actually come from the suit itself. At age fourteen, I learned the more modern equivalent of these assumptions was "the suit makes the man." I've always wanted to be a superhero, and rather than give up my dream, I've simply utilized other costumes to reach my goal by using those uniforms to take on aspects of the superheroes I so admire.

Old jeans. Straw hat. Tool belt. My first grip on the heights of heroism occurred when I built houses in Mexico. While others in my group had deep spiritual experiences with God on the trip, I drew satisfaction from the process of building and watching the work of my hands come together into a dwelling for a family. The rest of my group received joy by doing good for good's sake; while I was thrilled that my good has a measured effect. This was the first aspect of heroism I discovered: results. The looks on the faces of the family were the greatest tangible representation of my work. While the physical incarnation was there as a squat, grey-sided building with a tarpaper roof, the implications of my actions and the joy of the family were punctuated by a little boy in a Spiderman shirt clinging to my leg with a whisper of "gracias, senior." The effort I put in had the result of a happy family, a new home, and a little boy who now had a shelter in which to express his own superhero fantasies.

Red shorts. Red jacket. Camouflage hat. As a lifeguard, I learned that protecting life was the second aspect of heroism I aspired to attain. Removing people in over their heads (quite literally) from the deep end of the pool feels so right and good. To dive down, lift the flailing individual out and onto my tube (the red-orange thing you see lifeguards walking around with) and swim the drowning over to the side was task of relatively minor effort that had far-reaching positive results. However, like in medicine, half the job is simply preventing accidents from occurring in the first place. When I taught a group of boys to swim as a Water Safety Instructor, the looks of joy on their faces as they moved themselves around the shallow end of their own filled me with pride. Lifeguarding was my second attempt at becoming a superhero, and it allowed me the opportunity to do something that the superheroes I admired did: saving lives. The fact that the kids I've saved still come to me around town even though I'm no longer working the pool are a testament to the heroics I performed. To them, I was already becoming a superhero that they admired.

Collared shirt. Khaki slacks. Blue slash. I was by far the youngest person running for the position, and each of the other candidates was far more accomplished than I. But as I raised \$4,000 for the community youth center, as I campaigned after school for the weeks preceding the election, and as I presented myself as an able and creative competitor for the office of Honorary Mayor, people began to take me seriously. When I was elected by a 55 percent majority over the other candidates, I knew that I had obtained the third heroic aspect I sought by overcoming neigh impossible odds. I had fought against opponents whom were more experienced and, though the underdog, emerged victorious. When working at community events, people notice my sash and come up to me asking if I am truly the mayor of my town. I respond "yes," and they are rightfully amazed. When I walk down the street and see adults in the community telling their children that I'm the town's mayor undoubtedly inspires the kids to act heroically. Although it's just an honorary position, every time someone asks about how I reached such a height, I am reminded that I'm only a few tiers away from the pantheon of superheroes I seek.

Legion cap. Leather jacket. White apron. Being in the Sons of the American Legion has taught me about the fourth aspect of heroism I want to obtain, but have yet to do so. While adorned in this uniform, I typically barbeque to raise money for the Post, which is then spent to help the community and veterans. My best memory of heroism was at the Wounded Warriors Road to Recovery event, where I was helping serve veterans who rode bikes along the coastline near my town. Many of the soldiers were wounded in various conflicts, and were missing legs or had prosthetics. When I was serving one older man in a wheelchair, Brian, he said "thank you." Out of habit, I extended my hand, and shook his, responding in kind. As I decline the shot of scotch he offered me, he told me the story about how he lost his leg. One of his squad members was injured and pinned down by sniper fire during Vietnam. Rather than abandon his brother in arms to fate, Brian charged across the divide, risking life and limb to reach the low bank where his friend lay bleeding. When he arrived, his squad member was shot through the chest and bleeding heavily. While entrenched at that position, Brian did his best to save his friend, and due to the renewed covering fire from his allies, managed to slide him back to the rest of the group. On the haul back to the squad, Brian took a bullet straight through the back of the knee, although he did finish dragging his ally out of the open ground. After the squad arrived back on the base, the tenuous attachment of the lower leg at the knee was almost frayed completely, and as a result was amputated. I thought long and hard about the story. Brian did more than my currently collected aspects. He saved a life, his friend lived, and he overcame the odds of being shot in the head by sharpshooters. But he did something else. Even in the face of death, he still held out and did his duty to his squad, even though it cost him a limb. The fourth aspect of heroism is duty and honor above self. While I haven't yet obtained this key aspect, I am well on my way to doing so.

White coat. Facemask. Green scrubs. A doctor sees the results of heroism on a daily basis in the lives he saves. He overcomes at times impossible odds—gunshots, bodies mauled in car crashes, and other horrors, at all costs. It is his duty to protect the people that enter his care, and his honor is dependent on whether or not he can save them. No longer will I merely be utilizing one aspect of heroism at a time, instead, as a trauma surgeon, I will go to work everyday wearing a uniform I will be proudful of wearing.

After all, with a superhero watching over them, the people I protect have no reason to be afraid. What more could I be proud of?

Admissions Reader Comments

What I liked most about this essay is that Mark took a common topic—his extracurricular involvement—and put his own personal spin on it. He was able to explain his contributions to his community and to the world by describing what characteristics of a superhero he portrayed while participating in each of his activities. Beginning each paragraph with a description of his "superhero outfit," he was able to join together a variety of different topics, allowing the essay to not only flow with ease, but also show creativity. Mark made his essay memorable by allowing me into his world. In the end, I had learned about where Mark had been and where he wants to go. He is the kind of student we are looking for—one who is going to make a difference both inside and outside of the classroom.

—Shannon Miller, Senior Assistant Director of Admissions