

College Application Essay Format

Prompt: “Discuss how your family’s experience or cultural history enriched your or presented you with opportunities or challenges in pursuing your educational goals.”

For generations my family has devoted their lives to actual survival and finding contentment. As Armenians, we have struggled through genocide and economical devastation. My family’s lives were focused on their livelihood as human beings. Survival was their first priority and thus education was not really an issue. For my grandparents, it was not even possible to attend school in any form. When my family chose to come to the US, they gave my brother and me the most amazing gift, the opportunity to gain a real education. I was given the chance to not have to struggle with attaining the best education possible. The struggles my family faced helped me realize that education is a true privilege. My family’s lack of education helps me focus more on getting the most out of my education and therefore being the first in my family to go to college.

As Armenians, my family has struggled a great deal to get us where we are today. My great grandparents lived through the Armenian Genocide by hiding in caves. After the Genocide, all four of my grandparents were born in Turkey, in small remote villages. They struggled to constantly work on their family farms to put food on the table. Education was not even an option in their small villages. None of my grandparents had the opportunity to go to school or even to learn how to read or write.

My parents were born in the same setting as my grandparents. Later on, their families were fortunate enough to move to the city. They moved to Istanbul, Turkey. My parents had the opportunity to begin school, but moving to the city presented a new struggle, that of finding jobs sufficient to support their family. This was of utmost importance in their survival. School was deemed less important and therefore my mother chose to stop attending school after the fifth grade in order to help support her family. She got a full time job at a sewing factory at the age of 12. My father was fortunate enough to be able to go to school and hold down a job at the same time, but he did not graduate from high school. Another reason my parents did not get an education is because their parents did not instill the value of education in them. At the time my grandparents did not realize how much of an impact education could have on their families.

Their struggles became even greater when they decided to move to Armenia. Both my mother’s and my father’s family realized it was a mistake to move to Armenia when they got there. It was apparent that Armenia’s economy had not recovered from the 1915 Genocide. Everyone had to work for the family to survive. Furthering their education was not even an issue. It was at this point my parents got married. They realized that life was going to be difficult in Armenia, no matter what, so they decided they would move to America.

I was six months old when my family got our Visas to travel to America. We made the long journey from Armenia to Glendale, California, in September of 1990.

My parents, my father's parents, my uncle, my three-year-old brother and I, at six months old, began our new lives in America together. This is where my family truly realized the value of education. They witnessed how education could define the way you live in America.

I am thankful for the opportunity to grow and achieve through education. My parents taught me that education is a privilege; that it shouldn't be taken for granted. Early on I came to the realization that I must take advantage of all the educational opportunities that the rest of my family never had. The support and admiration I get from my family has helped me set high educational goals for myself. I will graduate from high school in the top 5 percent of my class and go on to an academically prestigious University; my family gives complete support for my educational goals and aspirations. The first thing my grandparents ask when I see them is what I am learning in school and if I am keeping my grades up. They are proud to have such educated grandchildren. Seeing my grandparents struggle and feeling powerless because of their lack of education, makes me want to work even harder towards my educational goals. I want to show my family that our culture, as Armenians, does not just represent only the struggle to survive. Rather, we also represent the will to learn and the power that education has in determining our future.

Prompt: “Tell us a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it”

I turn up the dial on the portable heater and pull down the curtain separating the living room from the hallway in hopes that the always-frigid temperature of the room will rise. The trailer we live in is so decrepit that if we turn on the heat, the bill will be close to three hundred dollars for the month, which is one third of our monthly income. The conditions of living in a condemned trailer tend to be less than appealing, to say the least; we have mold that is visible on the ceilings, holes in the walls where the icy air comes through at night, and when it rains the water comes in and soaks the floor two feet into the doorways. However, we haven't always lived in such harsh conditions.

It was at the age of eight that my life was torn apart and I was first introduced to the horrific power of addiction. Drugs worked as a virus that took over my father and turned him into a different man. One day he put my mother and me on a Greyhound bus and calmly waved goodbye as we were no longer what he “needed” in life. Not only did I leave behind a very large part of my heart that day, but I also said goodbye to the comfortable lifestyle that I had grown up in. With my father no longer there to support us, my mom and I were introduced to the ways of government assistance; we were no longer people, just a case file number. Life became very hard as my mom struggled to get us through each month. On welfare, we only pulled in per month what most households make in about two weeks. The government didn't take into account that people needed luxuries such as heat and electricity.

The transition of moving across the country from everything I knew and loved was very hard on me. I withdrew from the world and I was no longer able to connect with anyone. My mom was the only comfort I had; I knew that everything she did was for me so that I could have a better life.

Then in the summer after sixth grade, I returned to Alabama to visit my family. Once I arrived, it was like things had never changed. I was seeing my family and I was happy again. The summer didn't last nearly long enough as time sped by at warp speed. The night before I was due back in Washington with my mom, I realized that I did not want to leave. Looking back on this now, I realize that my father was very irresponsible and wrong for saying that I could stay. However, hearing it that night, I was the happiest girl in the world because it meant that he was finally ready to fight for me again. The situation quickly escalated when I did not get off the plane as scheduled and my mom soon got a lawyer and the custody battle was on. After a few months, I saw less and less of my father. While he continued to fight for me in the courts, he began to frequently leave me at my aunt's house for weeks at a time and rarely came to visit. What I found most frustrating during this time was how he could act like everything was perfect on those few occasions he would come by to see me.

I had always been mature for my age and by this time doubts were beginning to creep in as I really thought about what my life would be like if I lived there, what it would be like without the one person I knew cared for me most and who I cared for in return. That is why when the day finally came for me to tell the judge whom I wanted to live with, I did what was best for me and I broke my father's heart.

When I returned to Washington, I was secretly filled with shame due to my very childish actions. However, I have come to realize that that experience led to the most critical decision of my life. I decided that I wanted more than my father could have ever given me. His life was filled with drugs, fines, court dates, and it was an altogether bad environment. I wanted a better life; I still do. For now I might live in a condemned trailer, but I won't forever. I don't want to have to worry about whether or not bills will get paid. My exposure to that life without the security net of my mother lit a spark in my soul that will never be put out. I will make life better for the two of us.

Prompt: “Tell us a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it”

The definition of yoga is yoking together of the mind, body, and spirit. This is what was written on the board the first day of Beginning Yoga at Clark College. At the time, I didn't understand or even bother think about the significance of this statement. It took weeks before I could fully realize the meaning of this and many other life changing ideas presented in the class. Being involved in yoga helped me shape my character and become who I am today. I developed my compassion, awareness, and interest in global problems. I also learned how to live in the moment and appreciate every day.

Coming into the class I had many misconceptions about the concept and purpose of yoga. I thought all you had to do was stretch and relax. It seemed so simple, but I couldn't have been more wrong. The poses are merely the vehicle on the journey to becoming aware of yourself and the world around you. The process of connecting the mind, body, and soul through meditating and developing my focus has truly benefited the way I live. I can accept and understand new and different ideas much easier than before. Increasing and strengthening my meta-position has been an essential part of becoming who I am.

My experience in the class made me think about things that I never would have considered otherwise. One of my favorite parts of the class was when we discussed compassion. I never realized how much more I could be doing to make a change. Each quarter there is a different fundraising project organized by the teacher. All of the students are encouraged to contribute and donate. We raised \$200 for an organization that provides medicine and support for children suffering from AIDS in Africa. I now have a newly found passion for gaining knowledge about our world and what I can do to help. It's made a huge impact on me and has inspired me to become more interested and involved in making a difference. I'm doing my senior project on the benefits of organic food on the environment and body. I've been working in the gardens at my school and learning about the damaging effects of conventional growing methods. I'm also a part of the environmental club where we recently started a recycling program at our school. Another club I have become active in is the genocide awareness group called STAND. It's still a work in progress, but in the future we hope to have a variety of fundraisers to raise money and awareness for the genocide in Sudan.

I have also loved learning about all of the physical aspects in yoga. I discovered new edges and I have learned a lot about my body and its limits. I feel much more aware of my place in the field and I have really benefited from the challenge of trying new things. I have enjoyed being able to improve my balance, flexibility, and all around physical strength. While I have been enrolled in the class I've lost at least 10 pounds. It's a great feeling.

It may be hard to believe that a simple yoga class can have such a drastic effect on someone, but I honestly believe it has changed me, and the way I live my life. My focus, awareness, understanding, strength, compassion, and interest in world problems have all been enhanced from being in this class. I feel like I finally understand how to yoke together my mind, body, and spirit. I was terrified to take a college course but I'm so glad I had the courage to try something new.

Prompt: “Evaluate a significant achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.”

In my life, I have taken many journeys without which I would not have experienced important truths. My father started us off early, taking us on many journeys to help us understand that true knowledge comes only from experience. We took trips every winter break to Madrid, Mexico, Costa Rica, and to Jamaica and Trinidad, my parents’ homeland for Christmas. Silly things I remember from those trips include the mango chili sauce on the pork in Maui, the names of the women who gave out the towels by the pools in Selva Verde, Costa Rica, eating dinner at 10 p.m. in Spain. These were all tourist experiences that I, at first, found spellbinding. My truths were the truths of the tourist brochures: beautiful hotels, beaches, and cities. I did not see the blindfolds. I did not appreciate how being held hostage by the beauty of the surface—the beaches and cities—blinded me to the absence of Puerto Rican natives on the streets of San Juan; I did not understand how the prevalence and familiarity of English conspired to veil the beauty of the Spanish language beneath volumes of English translations.

I learned more about these truths in my sophomore year of high school, when I was among a group of students selected to visit Cuba. My grandmother was born in Cuba, yet I had never thought to research my own heritage. I have remained the naïve American who saw Castro as some distant enemy of my country, accepting this as fact because this seemed to be the accepted wisdom. I soon became intrigued, however, with this supposed plague to my freedom, my culture, and everything good and decent. I began to think, just what is communism anyway? What’s so bad about Castro and Cuba—and I hear they have good coffee. I believed that what was missing was a lack of understanding between our two cultures, and that acceptance of our differences would come only with knowledge.

My first impression of Cuba was the absence of commercialism. I saw no giant golden arch enticing hungry Cubans with beef-laced fries; I did see billboards of Che Guevara and signposts exhorting unity and love. I realized, however, that much of the uniqueness that I relished here might be gone if the trade blockades in Cuba were ever lifted. The parallels and the irony were not lost on me. I was stepping out of an American political cave that shrouded the beauty of Cuba and stepping into another, one built on patriotic socialism, one where truths were just as ideological as, yet very different from, mine.

History, I recognized, is never objective. The journeys I have taken have been colored by my prior experiences and by what my feelings were in those moments. Everyone holds a piece of the truth. Maybe facts don’t matter. Perhaps my experience is my truth and the more truths I hear from everyone else, the closer I will get to harmonization. Maybe there is no harmony, and I must go through life challenging and being challenged, perhaps finding perspectives from which I can extract—but never call—truth. I must simply find ways to understand others, to seek in them what is common to us all and perhaps someday find unity in our common human bond. This is what life has taught me so far, my sum of truths gleaned from experiencing many cultures. I don’t know if these truths will hold, but I hope that my college experience will be like my trip to Cuba—challenging some truths, strengthening others, and helping me experience new ones.

Prompt: “Describe a challenge you overcame.”

The stiff black apron hung awkwardly on my hips as I casually tried to tie the strings around my waist. I had been at Gino’s Restaurant for only ten minutes when Maurizio, the manager, grabbed my arm abruptly and said, “Follow me to the dungeon.” Unsure of whether or not he was joking, I smiled eagerly at him, but his glare confirmed his intent. I wiped the smirk off my face and followed him through the kitchen, which was louder than Madison Square Garden during a Knicks/Pacers game. A tall woman with a thick Italian accent pushed me while barking, “Move it, kid, you’re blocking traffic.” I later learned she was a waitress, and waitresses did not associate with the low-level busboys. Maurizio brought me to a dangerously steep staircase that looked like it had been purposely drenched in oil to increase the chance of a fall. As he gracefully flew down each step, I clutched onto the rusty tile walls, strategically putting one foot first and then the other. Eventually, I entered the “dungeon” and was directed to a table to join two men who were vigorously folding napkins.

Pretending to know what had to be done, I took a pile of unfolded starched napkins and attempted to turn them into the Gino accordion. I slowly folded each corner, trying to leave exactly one inch on both sides, and ignored the giggles and whispers coming from across the table. When I finished my first napkin, I quickly grabbed another and tried again, hiding my pathetic initial attempt under my thigh. On my second try, I sighed with relief when I saw that what I had constructed slightly resembled an accordion shape. However, when I looked up, I saw that the other two men had each finished twenty perfect napkins. “Hurry up, little girl,” they said in unison, “We have lots left.” They pointed to a closet overflowing with white linens as I began to fold my third. The next couple of nights afforded me the opportunity to master such tasks as refilling toilet paper dispensers and filling breadbaskets. Just as I began to find solace in these more manageable jobs, I felt a forceful tap on my shoulder. A heavysset waiter who was sweating profusely barked, “I need one decaf cappuccino. Understand?”

“Um, okay,” I stuttered, unable to get up enough courage to admit that I had never attempted to make a cappuccino. I glanced over at the intimidating espresso machine and started to pace back and forth. The waiter reappeared and with a look of irritation snapped, “If you didn’t know how to do it, why didn’t you say so? I don’t have time for this!” Returning to the unnecessary re-cleaning of silverware, the only job I could comfortably perform, it dawned on me that my fear of showing ignorance had rendered me incompetent. I had mastered the art of avoidance and had learned nothing. I continued to clean vigorously, making sure to keep my eyes on the silverware so that no one would ask me to make another cappuccino.

Having barely made it through my first weekend at the restaurant, I was amazed at how relieved I felt to return to the familiarity of physics class. We were starting a new chapter on fiber optics. Moving through the material with greater ease than I had anticipated, we hit upon the topic of optical time domain reflectometers, and sweat began to form on my chest as I frantically flipped through my notebook. I marked my paper with an asterisk so that I would know to ask my teacher to explain this material when I met with him privately during my next free period. My teacher then said, “So, I’m sure you all understand OTDR, so let’s move on.” As all of my peers nodded in agreement, I suddenly realized that I was still not asking how to make cappuccino. I took a deep

breath and the fear of not learning overcame my usual fear of looking foolish and I raised my hand. After my question had been answered, I felt like the Red Sox lifting the curse. I erased the star I had made on my notebook and confidently listened as we moved on to the next topic.

I'm not suggesting that raising my hand and asking a question in physics class was a life-changing moment. It did not suddenly rid me of my fear of showing ignorance, but it definitely marked a new willingness to ask questions. When I returned to Gino's the next weekend, I continued to spend some time unnecessarily cleaning silverware, but after asking Maurizio how to use the espresso machine, I soon added making cappuccino to my list of life skills.