

Sample Common App Essays

Something Funny

“Alright,” said the Boss, leaning back into his chair. His mouth hardened into a line of disapproval, all a part of the act. “Do something funny.”

Something funny? Twenty sets of eyes focused on me, waiting for me to make them laugh. In that moment, my body froze. My pulse raced. My cheeks flushed, rivaling the redness of the plastic sphere tied to my nose.

“I can’t,” I sputtered. The words felt foreign in my dry mouth. My typical enthusiasm and confidence was lost somewhere between the folds of the curtain backstage, and I was stuck. I was on the verge of tears. Who knew that being an absolute fool was so difficult?

Let me clarify: When I learned I was selected for the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program for theatre, I had no idea I would be attending clown school. I love Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, and the occasional David Ives comedy; I knew nothing about the art of clowning, which revolves around physical freeness and spontaneity. Around my peers and family, I am a master of “goofballery,” a millennial style Lucille Ball. I usually have no qualms about making a fool of myself. When it comes to something as important to me as my art, however, I found I was having a hard time tapping into this levity.

All my life I have been a perfectionist. I want to set my pins *and* knock them down. I am a goal setter, the wilder the better: I want to hike the entirety of the Appalachian Trail; I want to perform on Broadway, and mitigate climate change. I am not afraid of risk, or at least I thought I wasn’t. I wasn’t afraid to pack up and leave the comforts of home last year for an outdoor boarding school in the mountains. I wasn’t afraid of performing a ballad to a packed house for the Spring musical. I embraced my fears when I rappelled 300 feet down “The Monkey Face” Spire. I relish taking on difficult tasks, organizing large groups, and working under pressure. But reality hit me hard last July, when I faced a difficult task and had nowhere to go. There was only the current moment, and that was terrifying.

I’ve spent so much of my life over-thinking, scratching my skin and worrying in circles. The future pulls my mind forward, occupying precious space with preoccupations of an unseen tomorrow, while my body is tugged back, reminded of past mistakes and regrets. It’s taken me years to understand that life is a collection of “nows,” every one limitless. While nothing excites me more than the prospect of new experiences, taking risk isn’t running off to the next adventure, or jumping on every opportunity that blows by. It’s staying put and leaning into those tasks and feelings that truly challenge me.

Though I didn’t succeed that week, I had a revelation. I began to connect with the clown. Its open, loving, and sometimes idiotic nature helped me uncover a side of myself that I had suppressed for too long in my attempts to get everything “right.” The summer I tried clowning, I learned the beauty of letting go. I learned to enjoy the view from the top of the tightrope of chance, rather than dread the fall downward.

Graduate 2013

The Kingpin

Four years of my life were spent as the Kingpin of an underground society of elite specialists. People warned me walking away from that life would not be easy; I should have taken their warnings far more seriously.

I went by the alias 'Emily'; my right hands were called 'Camille' and 'Lily'. The three of us led with unwavering will and the deepest commitment to our cause: The secrets of the fairy world *must* remain protected.

What began as whispered meetings held over animal crackers and juice boxes quickly escalated into information trade deals and the occasional turf war. My ranks grew with no recruitment necessary; our cause spoke for itself. Our little group of three quickly turned into twenty second-grade girls, each armed with a stick the size of her forearm, a construction paper purse filled with sand, and total allegiance to the world of fairies.

It was there that I learned the life skills that would propel me through the rest of my childhood. I didn't know it at eight, but rallying a group of preadolescent girls to fight an invisible threat to our fairy kingdom makes founding clubs in high school look like a breeze.

In the years that have passed, evil ogres and trolls have been replaced with challenges to women's reproductive rights, a climate crisis, and an ever-present fear for my safety in school. I face them with the same mindset I had back then, to charge headfirst into the fray and guide those who follow.

Not even five years after I walked off that fairyland playground my final time, I found myself at the head of a cause once again. During my freshman year of high school my friend was murdered in the Parkland school shooting. The grief and pain I felt was crippling, but nothing was as debilitating as the feeling of utter helplessness that overwhelmed me. All I wanted was to join the fight against gun violence so that I would never again lose someone I love, but as I looked around my community for a group to join, I was left empty handed. The same small voice that told me to *lead* all those years ago was once again whispering in my ear. Yet this time, it was a deliverance.

In the succeeding three years, that small voice has only grown louder. I chartered gun violence prevention organizations at both my school and my synagogue. I witnessed the cries of my generation stifled by older voices, so I started voter registration organizations that reminded them that we *do* have a voice, and I urged them to use it. I collected letters from my peers to deliver to government officials. I listened to the stories and dreams of the people who came across my path, and when I stood tall in DC in front of our country's lawmakers, the words that came out of my mouth were a culmination of each and every person who had trusted me to lead them.

Now at 18, I've learned to accept that I have no dormant magic powers, nor will I wake up one day with sparkling fairy wings. I know sticks and spells can't fix real world problems, though I must admit I've tried a time or two. Moving on from childhood comforts isn't always easy, but I am not afraid for the future. I've taken only the first few steps of a lifelong march for justice. Walking right alongside me are those who taught me to lead and trusted me to guide them. Though I'm not sure now where this march will lead me, I know I have an incredible cadre of people to call upon when the need arises. And who knows? Maybe those girls from the playground all those years ago will remember that feeling of fighting for something and answer an old friend's call.

Graduate, 2021

Linguistics

As a debater, I'm often judged for how I speak. Nearly every Saturday evening, my coach hands me a stack of papers scribbled with feedback about my speeches. I record these comments in a spreadsheet to discern consistencies in the critiques I receive. In the spreadsheet's criticism column, a pattern emerges: judges are regularly vexed by my overuse of the word "like."

Beyond practicing speech drills in an attempt to replace my "likes" with pauses, I largely ignored my filler words. This changed when I started watching *Skam*, a television show whose plot is dominated by relationships, friend drama, and partying teenagers.

Like filler words, *Skam* may seem vapid at first glance. Its twist is that it is set in Oslo and is in Norwegian. As a result, I have to translate each episode myself to watch it immediately after its release. After realizing that Google Translate and Duolingo would leave slang, syncopated forms, and cultural phrases unclear, I turned to a cadre of other English-speaking *Skam* viewers who deciphered each line through online collaboration.

One word that proved difficult to translate is "liksom," which directly translates as "similar to." However, *Skam* characters often use it in contexts where "similar to" does not make sense. After much confusion, I came upon an article that explained that "liksom" is a pragmatic particle, or filler word, as well as an adjective. Further research on pragmatic particles demonstrated their ubiquity across cultures, validating my use of them. It also introduced me to linguistics, which spread from filler words to other aspects of my life.

Now that I know of its existence, linguistics permeates my life with the same frequency that "likes" pepper my speech. An episode of *The World in Words* podcast explained that Ikea products are categorized by different kinds of Scandinavian words. For example, bookshelves are named after occupations, and room decorations are labeled with Swedish slang expressions. My sisters and I now spend Ikea shopping trips competing over who can accurately identify the furniture type of a given Ikea name. Apart from entertainment, the game offers a fun method of learning Scandinavian vocabulary.

Because language affects everyone, everyone can contribute to conversations about it. My friend Anya and I were recently discussing filler words. She speculated that she says "well" and "basically" more than "like" because equivalent words are common in Russian, her native language. The idiosyncrasies of her speech added nuance to my understanding of fillers.

Subjecting each sentence I hear or read to linguistic analysis adds vivid meaning to texts I formerly took for granted. The repetition of the same church prayers every Sunday had reduced their significance to me. However, I recently noticed in church bulletins the link between "spirit" and "respiration" and realized that the Bible alternates between "Lord" and "LORD" because of different Hebrew words for "God" that vary in reverence. Knowing the etymology of the terms restored the prayers as a path through which I could access spirituality.

I may never be able to reduce my like-per-sentence count to less than two. However, thanks to *Skam*, I can now appreciate that my filler words introduced me to a more colorful view of the world.

Graduate, 2018