A Guide to Writing the College Application Essay

~WHS English Department

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30 Things About Yourself

Here is a way for you to think about life in a thematic manner and to help you get ideas on how to answer those BIG questions like “In less than 200 words define yourself.” Think about anything you can about yourself including important events, important people, your culture, your community, your interests, humorous moments, your ideas, strange occurrences, etc. Now create a list of 30 things about yourself. Here are the rules:

* You can’t list more than five people.
* You must list at least three ideas, thoughts, or theories about yourself and your world.
* Each item may not be longer than one line.
* Think about and include events, people, interests, etc that are unique to you.

Once your list is complete, review what you’ve written looking for common themes. In other words, what do the items on your list have in common? List all of the common themes at the end of your list. Now take a look at these ideas that are important to you. Which of these do you want to write about? Begin writing a draft of your college essay and bring it to your senior English class in September. Remember, this is an important piece of writing that not only has a specific purpose, but it also has a specific audience, so do take the time to write a draft, or two, over the summer and revise it in the Fall. This will not only give you ample time to create this piece, but it will also allow you some time away from your essay so that you return to it with a new set of eyes.

Best of luck!

***Tips for writing your***

***College application essay***

Here’s advice from the people who read them!

Does writing a college application essay seem like a daunting task to you? For most people, the answer is a resounding “yes!” However, the essay is also an opportunity for you to show your talents and creativity to their best advantage.

To help you get started, here are some insights on writing an essay from the people who read hundreds of them every year — admission officers at ACM colleges.

The essay is your chance to use your voice

The essay is the living, breathing part of your application to a college. In the essay, you can speak in your own voice and **personalize** your application. Here’s your opportunity to show something about you that doesn’t really come across elsewhere in your application.

So, step back and be reflective. Think about who you are as an individual. How do you view the world? What do you care about deeply? What experiences and people have been important in shaping you as a person? What are your aspirations in life? It is in such reflection that you can find your own, unique voice. That’s the voice that will help you write an interesting essay that only **you** could have written.

Now, on to some nuts and bolts of writing the essay.

Show your command of the basics of good writing

Here are some key points that admission officers look for in an essay:

• Make sure to **answer the essay question** and to follow **all** the instructions that are given.

• Start off with a strong opening paragraph that captures the reader’s interest.

• Use a style that you find comfortable and that is appropriate for the subject matter.

• Use correct grammar, punctuation and spelling.

• Make a point and stick to it; develop your argument or narrative.

• Check **all** of your facts. Do you mention a date, place or event in your essay? Make sure it’s correct.

• Have you given your reader complete information, so he or she won’t be confused?

• In general, it’s best to be succinct. If there a recommended length for the essay, pay attention to it.

• The essay should be neatly typed.

• Remember that mistakes, especially sloppy mistakes, make it look like you don’t take the essay (and, by extension, the application) very seriously.

What to write about? Where to look for an essay topic

Does the application ask you to choose a topic to write about? There are as many (actually, many more) good topics as there are applicants. Here are some ideas for where you might look for an essay topic:

• Do you have hobbies and non-school pursuits that really excite you and that engage your heart and mind? Writing about your out-of-classroom interests could help bring out a part of you that’s not covered — or not covered completely and to your fullest advantage — elsewhere in your application.

• Is there a social cause that you hold near and dear? Remember, an essay is not an academic paper; but a cause that you feel passionately about, and that has been in your thoughts and activities, might be the basis for a strong essay.

• Perhaps there is an event (local, national or international) that has touched you in a personal way.

• Is there an academic subject that really sparks your interest? Why does the subject engage you? Has it led to experiences or study outside of school? There may be essay material that goes beyond the courses you took or scores on AP tests.

How to handle a topic

Often, colleges will ask you, the applicant, to write about an experience you’ve had, an achievement in your life, or someone who has had a significant influence on your life. In handling such a topic — or, for that matter, any topic you select — go beyond the ***what*** and dig into the ***how*** and ***why***. In other words, don’t settle for simply providing a description of an event. Take the next step and tell about the impact the situation had on you. For example:

• This is a personal essay, not a travelogue. So, if you’re writing about a trip to another country, tell about how your experiences effected you, and why they were interesting or meaningful to you. In other words, the people reading the essay are interested in what makes you tick and how you got the way you are, not in how the trains run in Paris.

• Are you writing a tribute to your grandparents and their influence on your childhood? Be personal and specific, not just sentimental. Explain how the particular things your grandparents did or said were important to you.

• Did you overcome an athletic injury and recover to perform well? A description of the type of cast you wore and your rehab routine is not likely to make a compelling essay. However, your reflections on what it felt like to be watching your teammates, instead of competing alongside them, might be the basis of a memorable essay.

**Why do colleges require essays?**

A college application includes a lot of information about you, such as grades, recommendations, lists of your extracurricular activities and test scores. All of that information is very important and helps admission officers form a picture of your accomplishments

and abilities. However, while it tells about how other people see you, there isn’t much about how you see yourself. It’s that inside view — how you see yourself — that colleges hope to find in your essay. The essay performs other functions, as well, such as:

• The essay can be a way of showing that you have researched and thought carefully about the college to which you are applying. It shows, in your own words, why you and the college would be a good “match.”

• An essay demonstrates your writing ability, which is a key component to success in college.

• In your essay, you can show that you are willing to put **yourself** into what you do. That kind of commitment is an important part of effective learning in college. And it shows the admission committee that you are someone who is willing and able to be a contributing member of a community of learners.

• Your academic record is the central and most important part of your application. For selective colleges especially, your essay provides additional insights about you — as a student and as an individual — for a college to consider as it reviews your application.

**Possible pitfalls when writing an essay**

• Writing a poem or making a videotape in place of an essay is probably not a good idea, unless you’re applying to a specialized

school that encourages such a submission.

• Humor can be risky, so be careful how you use it.

• “Honor code” rules are in effect when you write an essay, so do your own work and don’t make things up. As a practical matter, other items in the application, such as letters of recommendation, make it quite possible that you would be found out if you tried to make things up.

**Some final tips**

• **Leave yourself time to rewrite and revise.** For the great majority of people, this is not an easy assignment. Start early and leave

plenty of time! Most likely that means to give yourself weeks (not days, and certainly not hours!) to rework your essay.

• If your essay is longer than three pages (unless the instructions call for something longer), then it had better be interesting! Think hard about what you really want to focus on, and take out whatever gets away from your central point.

• **The admission committee will take your essay seriously.** You should, too. You have a lot to gain by putting in the time and effort to write a good essay!

**Suggested reading**

***The College Application Essay*** by Sarah Myers McGinty (The College Board, New York, NY).

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**Common Application Essay Prompts, 2013-14**

Source: <https://www.commonapp.org/CommonApp/Docs/DownloadForms/2013/EssayAnnouncementFinal.pdf>

The essay prompts have changed for the 2013-14 school year.

**These are the instructions you will see on the application.** The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. *What do you want the readers of your application to* *know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores?* Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need, but don't feel obligated to do so. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.) THE WORD LIMIT WILL BE ENFORCED.

Your prompt options:

1. 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.

1. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
2. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you

make the same decision again?

1. Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience

there, and why is it meaningful to you?

1. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from

childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Do some brainstorming for each topic above. Do not do this quickly! Take time to really think about the prompt. Write down all possibilities, even the ones that seem odd or obvious. Don’t count anything out. Often it’s the fourth or fifth (or sixth or seventh) idea that’s the best.

**College applications can be too good**

**Admissions officers wary of slick essays**

By Peter Schworm

Globe Staff / February 12, 2008

Sometimes it is the choice 10-cent word or two, a spot-on sublime or consummate, that is the giveaway. Maybe it is a series of suspiciously skilled turns of phrase, syntax the envy of Strunk and White, or some pitch-perfect metaphors that raise the red flags.

As college admissions officers sift through thousands of application essays penned by eager-to-please high school seniors, they increasingly encounter writing that sparkles a bit too brightly or shows a poise and polish beyond the years of a typical teenager.

With the scramble to get into elite colleges at a fever pitch and with a rising number of educational consultants and college essay specialists ready to give students a competitive edge, admissions officers are keeping a sharp lookout for essays that might have had an undue adult influence. In some admissions offices, such submissions receive the dubious distinction DDI, short for "Daddy Did It."

Colleges are now cross-referencing student essays against the SAT writing sample, and, if doubts linger, will ask for a graded writing sample or raise their concern with the student's high school guidance counselor. Harvard even passes along suspiciously strong essays to professors for a scholarly opinion.

"There's an awful lot of talk in the admissions profession about this," said William R. Fitzsimmons, Harvard's dean of admissions and financial aid. "It's very difficult to know how much of it is the student's own work. It's just very hard to spot."

The concern over heavy-handed adult involvement is mounting as the admissions essay has become a pivotal part of the application, a key way for students to stand out from the throngs of applicants with top grades and SAT scores. In the past five years, the percentage of colleges attributing "considerable importance" to the college essay has risen from 19 to 28, behind grades, strength of classes, and standardized test scores, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Admissions officers say they would almost never deny admission solely over a suspicious essay, unless they could prove it was plagiarized. There are many talented writers, and it would be a shame to misjudge them, they say. But at competitive schools that reject the vast majority of students, a hint of doubt can tilt the balance.

"The essay has over time become more important to the admission decisions, and that's trickling down to students," said Melissa E. Clinedinst, assistant director of research for the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

College administrators say that intense pressure to gain acceptance to selective schools has compelled parents to turn to high-priced essay editors and coaches.

"The euphemism we use is polished," said Parke Muth, an admissions dean at the University of Virginia. "If you're paying someone that much money, there shouldn't be fingerprints. But some essays have that sheen, that lemony-fresh smell that makes you wonder."

Outright plagiarism usually sticks out like a sore thumb, and suspicions can often be confirmed with a Google search. But detecting the helpful hand of a parent, guidance counselor, or writing coach, even for admissions officers who have read thousands of personal essays, takes a keen eye.

"We definitely encounter essays that seem too good to be true," said Eric J. Kaplan, interim dean of admissions of the University of Pennsylvania. "Highly sophisticated cadence and tone, perfectly polished prose, revelations that are almost profound, even for the most brilliant 17-year-old."

When an essay raises eyebrows, the first step is to judge it against the rest of the application, administrators say. A shimmering essay from a so-so English student, for example, clashes like "red stilettos and sweats," said Sarah M. McGinty, a Boston admissions consultant and author of "The College Application Essay."

"The application is a bit of an outfit, and mismatches raise questions," she said. "Good writers leave a trail of crumbs behind."

McGinty said that while she advises students on essay topics and edits their drafts, she is careful to let students write in their own voice.

In that vein, some colleges require essays on different topics and compare them, which can expose glaring discrepancies.

"Sometimes the difference in quality is remarkable," Kaplan said. "In the shorter essays, there will be no subject-verb agreement. Then the main one would be something a magazine would be eager to print."

Admissions officers say that there is nothing wrong with students receiving some outside help with their essays, such as suggestions on what to write about and emphasize, and that the vast majority of essays are the students' own. For that reason, admissions officials will only investigate when they believe adults are essentially ghostwriting the essays.

"There's a little bit of a disconnect sometimes," said Gil J. Villanueva, dean of admissions at Brandeis University. "We expect people to write like 17- and 18-year-olds, and sometimes it comes across like it could be in a book."

Admissions officers admit there is a fine line between a vigorous edit and wholesale reworking.

"We focus on the topic that will help personalize the student and help them stand out," said Larry Dannenberg, a college consultant in Framingham. "We are very, very careful to make sure that we're not writing the essay."

Admissions officers are not so sure, and some students protest that essay services can go too far. Rachel Merkin, a freshman from Wellesley at Ithaca College, said she rejected some of her coach's suggested editing, which she thought made the essay sound too mature and writerly.

"The editor definitely made my words sound good, I'll admit that," she said. "She made every word count. But I made sure I kept my voice in the essay."

Merkin's instincts were right, admissions officers say. Heavily edited essays often come across as scripted, sanitized. Essays with some rough edges are not only authentic, they are better reads.

Applicants are better off expressing themselves in their own words, admissions officers say.

"Almost the worst thing is for students to write to what they think we are looking for," said Stu Schmill, interim admissions director at MIT. "The best thing they can do is write from the heart."

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**In or Out: Inside College Admissions**

**By JODIE MORSE**

What to do about Theater Boy? That was the question vexing Peggy Walbridge and David Field as the two admissions readers paged through his application to Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. With a 1,420 SAT score, solid grades and top scores on two Advanced Placement exams, the applicant — we're calling him Theater Boy to protect his identity — certainly looked like Cornell material. He had appeared in professional music productions and helped raise over $50,000 to stage plays at his school. "That's pretty amazing," Walbridge muttered. Field chuckled as he read through the applicant's essay about his voice changing from a once beautiful boyhood soprano. Said Field: "There's a nice sense of humor in this writing."

Still, something gave the readers pause. There was nothing outstanding in the applicant's two teacher recommendations. A more gushing letter came from his boss at the pizza place where he worked after school, detailing Theater Boy's rapport with the restaurant's immigrant cooks. "He sure sounds like a wonderful employee," said Walbridge. Field interjected, "But is he a real scholar?" Theater Boy wrote that he wants to study politics and history. But the two readers wondered why he hadn't studied more of them already. Theater Boy's moment was fading as quickly as it came. "The more I think about it, I don't see enough real scholarship here," sighed Field. "I just have a feeling we can do better."

They can, because Cornell, like other �lite colleges, has seven applicants for every spot in its freshman class. As 1.2 million high school seniors begin the college-application process in earnest this month, competition has never been fiercer. Nor have students been better prepared. These days, kids in junior high take high school academic classes to make room for more demanding courses in the later grades. And in just the past decade, there's been an 83% increase in the number of ninth-graders who take the sat — just for practice.

But even if you didn't take calculus in the ninth grade, there are steps you can take at application time to better your odds. Last spring three of the country's most selective schools — Rice University, Bowdoin College and Cornell University — allowed TIME behind the closed doors of their admissions deliberations. The one stipulation: that TIME not use the names or certain identifying characteristics of kids like Theater Boy. The insights we gleaned won't substitute for top scores and grades. But they did puncture some of the myths that often prevent an applicant from winning admission to his or her favorite college.

**Myth 1** Make yourself look as well rounded as possible

You would think that a flutist-cum-poet with a 1,520 sat, an unblemished transcript and a passion for philosophy would find a warm welcome at Houston's Rice University. Renaissance Girl was involved in so many extracurricular activities — band, the literary magazine, the astronomy, philosophy and poetry clubs — that it took minute handwriting to squeeze them onto the application. Yet she never made it off the waiting list.

In the parlance of Rice's admissions committee, Renaissance Girl was a "clubber," a serial joiner of school organizations who never rises to a leadership position. One Cornell applicant submitted a one-page, single-spaced addendum to his application that cataloged, as one admissions officer exasperatedly termed it, "every activity he's ever participated in." With the "spread too thin" designation on his voting sheet, even his perfect 800 score on the verbal half of the SAT wasn't enough to stave off rejection.

Says Don Saleh, Cornell's dean of admissions and fInancial aid: "Students should occupy leadership roles and show years of commitment. That's one way we know kids aren't doing activities just to put them on their applications." Another is to ask how many hours students spend on each activity. And in an instance where the numbers seemed high? A gimlet-eyed Cornell officer whipped out a calculator to reveal that the (unsuccessful) applicant claimed to spend 50 hours a week on after-school pursuits.

**Myth 2** The essay counts only in close calls

Before even glancing at grades or test scores, admissions officers at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, rate a student's personal statement. That first impression can color the whole discussion. The committee, for example, issued a swift rejection to a student whose essay was riddled with typos. After reading a moving tale of how one student bonded with a Chilean immigrant struggling to educate his children, assistant dean Debbie DeVeaux went to bat for the applicant: "I love this guy. I hope you love him as much as I do."

A little warmth and humor never hurts either. Bowdoin requires a second, shorter essay on an influential teacher. Most students opt for a boiler-plate hymn to the hardest teacher in school. But a rare description of a teacher who "was big, but not overweight ... like you could trust her to provide you with bread and beef through the winter" got the committee laughing. And the essay's touching conclusion — "she taught me how to improve from a mistake and still like myself" — sent them straight for the admit stamp. Otherwise, the student's B record would not have got him in.

Admissions officers say the most successful essays show curiosity and self-awareness. Says Cornell's Saleh: "It's the only thing that really lets us see inside your soul." While there's no one right formula for soul baring, there are many wrong ones. It's disastrous to write, as one Rice applicant did, of what he could "bring to the University of California." A self-absorbed or arrogant tone is also a guaranteed turnoff. Exhibit A: a Rice essay beginning, "I have accumulated a fair amount of wisdom in a relatively limited time of life." Exhibit B: A Cornell applicant who set out to "describe the indescribable essence of myself."

The officers accept that student essays are often heavily edited and adapted for multiple applications. But if an essay seems too polished, they'll often compare the writing with that in other parts of the application, and even to a student's verbal SAT score.

**Myth 3** Send your "award-winning" art portfolio

Each spring admissions officers amass boxes full of discarded watercolors and videotaped productions of the Music Man — and the occasional batch of brownies — all sent by students hoping such extras will increase their prospects. More often they distract readers from the real meat of the application. One Cornell applicant, Budding Author, directed readers to her "countless short stories and novellas." Though the admissions officers were impressed with the other parts of Budding Author's application, they didn't quite know what to make of her creative writing. "Well it's not quite soft porn," said a confused Walbridge. Instead of receiving a fat acceptance packet, Budding Author was wait-listed.

At Cornell and Bowdoin, admissions readers typically send art slides and music tapes out to department heads to get an expert appraisal. Those rare applicants who get a ringing endorsement are usually instant hits back in the committee room. That was the case for one student's trumpet performance, which received the top rating from Cornell's music department. But, noted reader Ken Gabard, "it's only 1 in 100 who gets this kind of reception."

**Myth 4** Don't spill your guts

Admissions officers love a good against-all-odds story line. "We like to see that kids have overcome adversity," says Cornell's Gabard. "Goodness knows, they'll face adversity in college." Provided the adversity is authentic — like a death in the family — it can make a much more gripping essay topic than a summer jaunt through Europe. And if applicants have suffered any dip in academic performance, they need to account for it, either in an essay or a counselor's letter.

With scattered Cs in the ninth and 10th grades and football and guitar as his only extracurriculars, Comeback Kid would normally have missed Bowdoin's first cut of applications. But in his essay he wrote of how he'd spent those first two years of high school: "slowly poisoning myself in a pool of malted hops." Then a close relative who was an alcoholic died of a stroke. After that, he cut out the beer, got A-pluses in his senior year and won a national writing award. He also won a unanimous thumbs-up for admission.

Schools are also taken with good students from families with little education or money. At Bowdoin, this is known as an "NC/BC" case, for no college/blue collar; at Rice, it's an application with "overcome" factors. At Cornell, admissions readers were initially not too impressed by a student with good test scores but whose grades were all over the map. Then one reader noticed that she came from a family with no higher education and worked up to 40 hours a week as a cashier. But it was her essay that really swayed the committee, as she described being derisively called "white girl" by some other blacks and related how one classmate told her that he "looked forward to seeing me �flipping burgers' after graduation."

Before you go crafting your sob story, it bears noting that college admissions officers are among the world's finest b.s. detectors. A case in point: one student's Cornell essay about a relative's homosexuality struck an admissions reader as gratuitous: "This has got shock value written all over it."

**Myth 5** If a teacher says he'll write a rec, it will be a good one

For admissions officers, there's a distinct hierarchy to recommendation letters. "Brilliant means more than bright," says Bowdoin's senior associate dean of admissions Linda Kreamer. "�Hardworking and motivated' probably means the student isn't too smart." Cornell readers bristled at a recommendation hailing a student who "cares more about what he learns than what grades he gets." Translation: If admitted, he'd wind up on academic probation.

The best recommendations describe a student's accomplishments with specific and knowing details. Bowdoin's admissions committee was on the fence about one applicant who had good grades but below-average test scores. Then it scanned his two recommendations. "A rare gem," said one letter; the other called him a "mature humanitarian." Most compelling, though, was a tidbit missing from the rest of the application. The student had come up with a unique scheme for supporting world famine relief: he pledged his weekly allowance and persuaded his parents to give matching grants. Cornell readers were similarly impressed with a letter that touted an applicant's papers on Billie Holiday and Vietnam veterans.

To improve his accolades, a student shouldn't necessarily ask the best teacher in school, who's probably swamped with other requests, but should instead seek out someone who really knows him and his work. A student should also jog the memory of his recommender with a cheat sheet of his accomplishments — including a copy of a well-received term paper.

**Myth 6** Don't be too eager

Colleges want students who want them. That's one reason why kids who apply for early decision have a leg up. But for all applicants, it's unwise to skip a college's visit to your high school or, as one Rice applicant did, to ask an alumni interviewer if Rice was just a "second-tier" institution. As with most interactions a student has with a college, this one was duly noted. The interviewer wrote, "I don't think Rice should accept him."

There are also less obvious faux pas, like stating your intended major without checking that it's offered. Students are sometimes asked the number of schools to which they're applying, and some colleges take offense at being one of many under consideration. Rice was weighing one superbly qualified applicant when a reader mentioned that the school was just one of 15 on his list. The student wound up on the wait list.

But such close calls can just as easily swing the other way. Bowdoin's committee was ambivalent about one applicant until it read a last-minute addition to his file, a note saying, "Bowdoin College is at the top of my list." He was admitted.

— With reporting by Andrew Goldstein/Brunswick and Flora Tartakovsky/Houston

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WHS Student Samples

I learned the oh-so famous rule in the second grade. I still remember the floral dress that Mrs. Forsythe wore when she wrote it on the chalk board (yes, the chalk board): “I before E, except after C”. Then I remember looking down at my paper and seeing my name: Stacie. I instantly shot my hand up in the air in a panic to let Mrs. Forsythe know that there was something terribly wrong. My name completely went against this rule. “Well,” she replied to my trembling body, “your name is spelled in a very odd way, and besides, this rule only applies to nouns, not names.” *Odd?* I was mortified. I didn’t want to be odd. I already had several of my teeth missing; I was wearing hand-me-down clothes from my older brother, and my hair was finally growing back after I had to have it all cut off due to lice. The last thing I wanted to be described as was “odd”. That day at recess a boy called me “Rule-breaker” making a direct connection to the spelling of my name and the golden rule we had just learned in Language Arts. I never broke the rules! I had worked so hard to be a good kid. I wanted to change my name right then and there.

As I grew up I found that the annoyances of my strangely-spelled name turned into cool little quirks. People misspelling my name turned into short conversations starting with a correction and developed into talks about how unique my name was and how the “ie” ending added a feminine touch. I owe credit to my “odd” name for my ability to talk to people and carry a good conversation. When I wanted customized hair clips for my thirteenth birthday, I had to get them specially made because they didn’t have the correct spelling available in the store. I was certain they had misused the word “specially”, but as I thought about it I realized that the other girls with normally-spelled names didn’t get to have anything specially made. Their names were predictable. My name reflects my personality in that sense. I’m very unpredictable. Sometimes I’m crazy, sometimes I’m calm. At times I’m intense and focused and other times I’m relaxed and up for a good time. I think having an unpredictable personality is important in the media world because it’s a very unpredictable realm of work.

I’m different and just like the customized clips said, I was special. The day I ordered those clips was the day I realized I loved that my name was “odd”. It meant that I as a person was odd and to this day I am perfectly happy with that. I had never been so proud to be a “rule-breaker”.

Sitting down for dinner at the kitchen table, the same as every other night, I pass out forks, knives and plates to the five seats. This is the same table I have sat at for dinner since I was in a high chair, the same large oval table, light brown birch wood with a smooth finish. I lean back on the same ladder backed seat that has been mine as long as I can remember. The five of us orient ourselves around the table, with my mom and dad at the heads and my older sisters Shannon and Corinne and I around the sides. My dad joins us at the table after he has put on a Beatles album, a favorite of dinner soundtracks. I patiently listen as Corinne finishes a story from her rugby team at college. “And that’s how I got this one” she says pointing to a nasty looking bruise on her bicep. “Ouch!” exclaims my mom along with her usual warnings of being careful and protecting herself. Shannon is digging into her food as my dad tells my mom of his bike trip home and my mom tells him of her day. Rarely interjecting, just absorbing all of their words, I quietly sit. This set up has endured longer than anything in my house that I can remember. As things change, wall colors, wooden floors, granite counter tops, our dinner table has remained steadfast.

Through the ups and downs of life the table may not have changed physically or been replaced, but there is a void at dinner time throughout the school year. This year was the first time both of my sisters have been away in college. I remember the night I found out the purpose of the small latches under the table, the ones that are fun to play with when I am bored at dinner, when my dad asked me to help him unlatch each and then take the center board out of the table. Just like that it shrunk into a table for four and dinner time changed. It was just me and my parents, a nightly set up that sometimes I dreaded. My dad always plays music during dinner and with just the three of us it seemed a little louder, and dinner conversation just a little quieter and more sparse. My dad would say “How was your day today” and I would reply “Fine”. My mom who is overworked and stressed out would talk with my dad about her problems all dinner. The table felt so different, but we still all came together night after night no matter how late. Something we value so highly could not merely fall by the wayside. My parents learned new things about me and we connected slowly, more and more. This new dinner time changed my perspective on family and its importance, I found myself missing my sisters the most at dinner time even though in the past we fought constantly at the table. I realized that independence is an important value, but it is even more important to be with those you care about and connect with people socially.

Now my sisters are back for the summer and we all take our usual seats. Despite music blaring from the living room, our conversation is full and everyone is very vocal. We crack jokes about future roommates and how to scare them by asking, “Are you bringing a toothbrush? I don’t want to pack doubles.” It’s late tonight, close to eight thirty when we all sit down to eat, but my mom worked late and having us all back at the table together is so perfect it could have been midnight for all I care. Though dinner together is gone in many homes, I find that the conversation and humility, sharing and listening skills I learned at dinner are invaluable in helping me interact with others and be successful.

This past summer, I watched from my bedroom window while my father dismantled my childhood swing set. Slowly, laboriously, he hacked away at the weeds that encircled the rotting wood, sawed through the wet moss that grew fuzzy and green around the monkey bars, and heaved the once-yellow plastic slide into his collection of trash. I leaned slightly forward as he stepped into that particular, deep groove in the mulch where my feet had constantly swung so many years before. He slid the wing out of the rusted holders, and tossed it gently to the ground.

My childhood revolved around that swing. Every day after school I leapt off the school bus and ran up the steep hill, threw my bag at the door, and headed to the backyard. Sliding into the little yellow seat I felt an immediate ease of familiarity and comfort. I kicked my legs back and forth, and as I flew, first high and then higher, my mind began to whirl, breaking free and scattering its contents of jumbled ideas. I told the world around me the many stories tumbling through my head, speaking aloud to the trees and the forest behind me of the many little characters and their individual adventures, of lives far greater than my own. I told of girls named Angela who rescued abandoned puppies, of Cynthias who survived the Titanic, and of simpler Claires who loved being with their best friends and fought constantly with their parents. I swung in the midst of rain showers, after snowstorms (my father had to shovel out my spot beneath the wing on these occasions), and in the windy, blustery days of fall. I swung when I was upset or confused or bursting with happiness. My swing became my sanctuary, my place of creativity and joy.

Now, as my father sawed and unscrewed and chipped away, the swing looked like an ancient artifact, lost in the passage of time and finally being rediscovered. I felt no sadness in seeing its slow dismantlement, only a respectful acceptance. Those little-kid days on the swing helped nurture and develop my creativity and passion for story-telling and eventually, as I traded in my swing for pencil and paper, writing. As I said goodbye to my swing set and prepared for my senior year of high school, I also said goodbye to my years of childhood and innocence, and tried to face the reality of change as I entered a whole new world. Sometimes I glance out my window and see the large space that was once filled with fantasy and amazing adventures, and I feel a small longing and nostalgia for the past. I comfort myself knowing that the little swinging girl remains a part of me. I can always return to her, laughing and telling her stories to the tree and the forest and the world around her.