

Essays That Worked

An essay can take infinite forms. But there are common characteristics of ones that have worked in the past.

- An Opening Line That Draws You In
- Great, Detailed Opening Story
- Turning a Specific Incident Into a Deeper Insight
- Using Concrete Examples When Making Abstract Claims
- Using Small Bits of Humor and Casual Word Choice
- An Ending That Stretches the Insight Into the Future

TRAINRIDE

A family sits down for dinner. A young man plays piano. A mother patiently braids her daughter's hair. Warm yellow windows stare back at me. Each one offers entry into simple routine nights, but they all jerk away as my train pushes forward and the conductor demands my ticket.

I was adopted from foster care when I was 5. However, I have known my birth family and my mentally ill birth mother my entire life. Three times a year I travel from my home in the South Bronx to my birth family's in Montgomery County, Maryland. The switch from the poorest congressional district in the country to one of the wealthiest, mixed with the transition between families, makes me lose my bearings. Going south, I lose my mother. Going north, I lose my grandmother, aunts, uncle and cousins. Yet the sense of loss I feel leaving one family behind is relieved by my time on the train. The journey both ways holds unparalleled meaning for me; I find peace.

The train ride is my home between homes. It is a pause in the rush of the day as I am suspended between my two lives. While the train rocks steadily onward, the landscapes and buildings of each northeastern state keep me company. As the train barrels farther from the city and the blur of green and brown forest claims its territory, I find solace in the contours of the leaves and bushes. My world exists only as the length of each long brown-bodied tree, and I can find calm in their simple, easy presence. As the wheels of the train race the sun's undeviating rays, I can be just another passenger admiring the bright afternoon. I learn to see my two families as gifts, while the junkyards of Baltimore whir past my eyes. I am reminded of how lucky I am to have two homes to go between.

Maybe the family I see sitting down for dinner just attended a funeral. Maybe the man playing piano is lonely. Maybe the mother patiently braids hair so her daughter will forget her difficulties in school.

Because I am surrounded by transient images of family that beg questions to be asked, I am reminded to be grateful for the variety of my own family. In Maryland, my grandmother cooks all afternoon until the kitchen is thick with scents of oil and cumin, and their perfume flows under each room's doorway. My cousins and I sift through the attic's fascinating content until we are greeted by the familiar smell, telling

Pro. I have learned to be humble and to work even harder than my peers to meet their (and my) expectations.

I developed a sense of lightheartedness. When people playfully make fun of my height, I laugh at myself too. On my first day of high school, a girl dropped her books in a busy hallway. I crouched down to her level and gathered some of her notebooks. As we both stood up, her eyes widened as I kept rising over her. Dumbfounded, she dropped her books again. Embarrassed, we both laughed and picked up the books a second time.

All of these lessons have defined me. People unfamiliar to me have always wanted to engage me in lengthy conversations, so I have had to become comfortable interacting with all kinds of people. Looking back, I realize that through years of such encounters, I have become a confident, articulate person. Being a 7-footer is both a blessing and a curse, but in the end, accepting who you are is the first step to happiness.

ON BEING AN ONLY CHILD

People who have grown up with siblings might laugh at the idea that I consider being an only child an essential part of my identity. But just as a relationship with a brother or sister can be deeply formative, so can the absence of these relationships. For me, this absence has been a powerful stimulus to my imagination and my growth as a person.

When people discover I am an only child, they often react with some sympathy, as if growing up alone meant growing up lonely. It's certainly true that I spent a lot of time alone; even though I had close friends in elementary school, I hung out with them mostly on weekends. But I never felt lonely. As a young child, I loved to get lost in different projects of my own--whether it was building rudimentary circuits and illuminating LED lights with my "Deluxe Electronics Lab," or improving my origami technique with my "Fold-a-Day" calendar. In these activities, I needed no conversation partner, no playmate, because the act of creation itself became my friend, challenging me to keep improving upon my skills. But I didn't always need wires and bulbs and paper to keep me interested; over time, I learned to find satisfaction in the simple act of daydreaming.

I treat such "daydreaming" very seriously. For me, daydreaming is a powerful tool for my creativity. Almost all of my ideas--whether they concern building a robot, writing a student council speech, or solving a problem--originate in my daydreams. One thing that perhaps sets me apart from the stereotypical "daydreamer" is that I have the ability to put my daydreams to use in real life. During my sophomore year of high school, I was watching two of my friends arm wrestle, and I began to daydream about arm wrestling. Arm wrestling is a peculiar sport, in that it's always one-on-one; there are no variations with more than two players. I began to wonder if there was a way to have two people arm wrestle against another two people. My daydream then underwent a critical metamorphosis, from the realm of ideas to the realm of execution. That summer, I built a model for a double arm wrestling

Through these simple questions, I happened upon much greater lessons regarding human interaction, diversity, and connectedness. In my first interview, a local businesswoman told me about her rocky relationship with her mother, her struggles with mental illness, and her friend in jail, within 45 minutes of meeting her and in the middle of a busy Starbucks. An artist educator I worked with told me that getting a tattoo "was like claiming a part of yourself and making it more visible and unavoidable." A model/homeopath said that having a tattoo is like "giving people a little clue about you." A psychologist shared how she wishes that she could turn her tattoos "on or off like a light switch to match different outfits and occasions." I've realized that tattoos show the complex relationship between the personal and the public (and how funny that can be when a Matisse cutout is thought to be phallic, or how a social worker's abstract doodle is interpreted as a tsunami of sticks, alien spaceship, and a billion other things by the children she works with).

I've learned so much about the art of storytelling and storytelling through art. I've strengthened relationships with people that had conventional roles in my life and created friendships with some unconventional characters. Most importantly, I've realized that with the willingness to explore a topic and the willingness to accept not knowing where it will go, an idea can become a substantive reality.

WORKING AT A FAST FOOD RESTAURANT

The drive-thru monitor on the wall quietly clicks whenever a person pulls up to the menu screen. It's so subtle I didn't notice it my first two months working at Freddy's, the retro fast-food restaurant looming over Fairfax's clogged stretch of Route 50. But, after months of giving out greasy burgers, I have become attuned to it. Now, from the cacophony of kitchen clangs I can easily pick out that click which transports me from my world of fry oil into the lives of those waiting in the drive-thru.

Click

A male voice drifts into my ear. He orders tenders, with a side of cheese sauce. "How much cheese sauce is in a cup?" he frets, concerned over the associated 80 cent charge. The answer is two ounces, and he is right to worry. It's a rip-off.

After I answer him, my headset goes quiet for a second. Finally, his voice crackles through.

"Do you sell cheese sauce by the gallon?"

Click

A man orders two steakburgers and two pints of custard.

Minutes later, he reaches my window. I lean out to take his credit card, only to meet the warm tongue of a wizened dog.

The man apologizes: "She just loves your restaurant."

I look at the dog, her nose stretching out of the car and resting on the window ledge, then look at the order he had given me.

Once I hand him his food, the dog sniffs one of the pints.

"No!" he reprimands. "Only after you eat your dinner."

He sets a burger between her paws, then speeds away.

MUSICAL MOMENT

Whether we are opera singers or shower-wailers, ballet dancers or awkward shufflers, we all understand how music makes us feel, and more importantly, makes us move. Moving to music is so much a part of the human experience that it seems innate to us as a species. A recent study supports this, showing that fetuses react to music with increased motion, and in some cases, open their mouths as if to sing. Once out of the womb, this response only grows: a catchy tune makes hips swing and toes tap, and in certain situations, heads bang.

The music that moves us is itself a product of movement. As a musician who is a tactile learner, I'm keenly aware of the way a piece feels as I play it. Despite years of piano teachers telling me to read the page in front of me while I play, my eyes habitually wander to my hands, where the music is really happening. This gap between reading and performing music keeps me from fully expressing my musical ideas.

As a way to bridge this divide, I am trying to create a simple instrument that translates movement directly into music, using motion to capture melodic ideas and expressions. I got this idea while watching a lively orchestra conductor, who sometimes overshadowed the players so much that he seemed to be dancing alone, pulling notes through the air with his baton. Enchanted by how effortlessly he stirred the ocean of sound around him, I caught myself swishing my hands back and forth to the beat. As I lifted my arm to match the swelling tempo, I wondered: what if we could turn all kinds of movement into melodies?

It occurred to me that I could apply my skills in computer science and digital media to create a movement-to music application. To a computer everything is math, including music and movement. Every note and motion can be tracked, stored, and broken down into a set of variables, based on information from an outside source, such as a computer mouse or touchpad. I am currently taking advantage of this relationship by creating a web-based application that synthesizes music based on interactions with the cursor. The program, once completed, will play notes as the mouse is pressed, with unique pitch and tone determined by the position and motion of the pointer.

Eventually, I'd like to take this concept further using more sophisticated technology. I plan to take data from a motion sensor or camera and convert it directly into sound, using a simple device that tracks movement and translates its vertical position into musical pitch, its horizontal position into musical dynamics (soft to loud), and its speed into musical tone. Imagine being able to move your hand to generate a pitch that changes with the direction of movement, producing a musical phrase. Sophisticated users would be able to control relationships between variables to suit their needs; for example, they could link various components of movement (such as direction or speed in all three dimensions) to a wide range of musical characteristics, including, but not limited to, timbre, harmonics, and distortion.