

# Essays That Worked

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## Hear from the Class of 2025

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These selections represent just a few examples of essays we found impressive and helpful during the past admissions cycle.

Rozanne

### Lifelong Learning

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The white yarn slipped off my aluminium crochet hook, adding a single crochet to rows and rows of existing stitches, that looked to be in the form of a blob. Staring at the image of the little unicorn amigurumi lit up on the screen of my laptop, and looking back at the UMO (unidentified messy object) number five, I was extremely perplexed.

This had seemed so easy. Round 1, construct a magic circle with 6 single crochets. Done. Round 2 was an increase round resulting in a total of 12 stitches. Also done. The remaining rounds were blurred into hours and minutes that should have resulted in a little white creature in the likeness of a unicorn, but sitting on my desk (much like the four days before today) was a pool of tangled white yarn. It was not until day seven that a creature with a lopsided head whose horn was the only identifier of the mythical being emerged.

Very much like learning how to crochet, my journey in forging my own path and finding a passion was confusing, messy and at times infuriating. Even in primary school, I had heard all the stories of individuals finding their own route in life. I had been told stories of those who found their passion at a young age and were exceptionally proficient at their craft, of those that abandoned their interests and pursued a lucrative career, even those who chose their dreams but regretted it afterwards. This weighed heavily on me, as I was determined to have a success story as many of my other family members had. The only problem was that I did not have a direction.

In the years following primary school, I stepped out of my comfort zone in a frenzy to find a passion. I joined the school orchestra where I played the violin, and a debate class to practice public speaking and become much more eloquent. At my ballet school, I branched out to contemporary and jazz dance. I stuffed myself with experience similar to an amigurumi engorged with batting. I found myself enjoying all of those activities but soon enough, I was swamped with extracurriculars. Just like the tangles of white yarn on my

desk, I was pulled in all directions. I still felt lost. To make things worse, it seemed as if everyone else had found their path in life, and they had all become white unicorns while I was still doubting the stitch I just made.

It was not until high school that I realised that I could view this mission to find a passion from another perspective. While successfully completing a crochet project is an accomplishment itself, the motions of making slip knots, single or double crochets takes you on an adventure as well. The knots that I had encountered in my craft were evidence of my experiences and what shaped me as an individual. My exploration of various paths through detours may have sometimes resulted in roadblocks, but I continued to persevere and learn from my experiences, applying the skills that I have gained to future knots. The mini adventures that I went on were all crucial to me in the greater journey of life.

Through trial and error, the current adventure that I am on resonates the most with me, taking me down the path of service and environmental activism. However, I have learnt that no one path is static, and I can be on more than one path at a time. While I may only be halfway to the proportionate unicorn amigurumi that some others may have already achieved, I still have so much to learn and so much that I want to learn, and so my journey to grow continues.

#### Admissions Committee Comments

Rozanne's essay showcases how pursuing a new hobby, crochet, is analogous to her larger efforts to find her passions. She's able to reflect that, while both processes may seem messy and confusing at first, putting in the requisite effort and time leads to greater and more meaningful outcomes. Rozanne's writing touches on several additional pieces of impact that she's been involved in, from dance to environmental activism, and hobbies like crochet. On an even greater level, though, the essay allows the admissions committee to see that she is someone who will take advantage of opportunities, engage with her community in a number of ways, push herself outside of her comfort zone, and be able to reflect on her own development. As we think about how she'll contribute to the larger Hopkins community, it's clear that while she may still be determining her exact passions, she'll dive right in and make the most of her time with us.

Samuel

### **Stepping Out of my Comfort Zone**

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If you told me I would be playing a sport called squash at 11 years old, I would call you crazy. But in seventh grade, I was at a new school 10 times bigger than my last one. I felt like a little fish in a big pond. I was quiet, withdrawn, and very introverted. A lot of the time, I

stayed where I was comfortable.

During the first week of school, a group of people visited the school and they introduced themselves as Squashbusters. At that time, I'd only heard of Squash once before, but I didn't really know what it was. Because the program combined the sport of squash with academic support, mentoring, and service opportunities, I decided to sign up. It's been six years and this program has made a monumental difference in my life.

Being a part of SquashBusters is a program that really pushed me out of my shell to the point where I've grown accustomed to challenging myself. In SquashBusters, they tell us to push ourselves past our limits on the squash courts, but that mindset has transferred to other areas of my life as well. From team trips and tournaments to cringy karaoke moments and participating in eccentric traditions like our annual SquashBusters Olympics, my comfort zone has steadily grown larger. My peers brought out a side of me I didn't even know existed. I haven't transformed completely from introvert to extrovert, but I've become more social as the years go by.

At Hopkins, I want to do something similar. I want to try new things and embrace the campus traditions. Even though I will develop intellectually from the many academic classes and clubs/activities offered on campus, I feel as though a true community is birthed from exploring beyond what one's used to. From traditions like Blue Jay Opening Day and the Spring Fair to the many world-changing clubs like the Amnesty International club and the Foreign Affairs Symposium, the different ways to be involved in the Hopkins community is limitless and invigorating and I can't wait to be a part of the Hopkins family.

#### Admissions Committee Comments

Samuel's essay is a reflection on pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone which is not only an important life lesson but also something that Hopkins students do every day. Our students push the boundaries of discovery, are faced with challenges in and out of the classroom, and pursue newfound passions. By growing accustomed to challenging himself, Samuel exemplifies these characteristics and is able to take the lessons he has learned on the squash court into other areas of his life. He shows that if given the opportunity, he would flourish on our campus given the variety of academic and extracurricular opportunities and that he is equipped with the tools to overcome whatever challenges he is faced with.

Elizabeth

## **Red Over Black**

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“Bring the ace of spades up,” my Grandmother said as we started our first game of solitaire after I got home from school. “Now, put the black eight onto the red nine.” We played solitaire often, working together to reorganize the cards most efficiently. While it was meant to be a single-player game, solitaire was the one thing we did together, moving and dealing the cards in a symphony of order: red to black, red to black. Pulling the pattern out of the random array of cards.

For hours, we sat at our glossy kitchen table, playing game after game. If there were no more moves to make, I would always sneak a card from below a column without my grandma seeing. She always did. I couldn’t understand- What was the big deal of revealing the cards? We might win one out of ten games played. But if we just ‘helped ourselves,’ as I liked to call it, we could win them all. I didn’t understand her adherence to the “Turn Three” rule. Why not just turn the cards one by one? It was too frustrating to see the cards go by, but turn exactly three and not be able to pick them up! After one game we lost, I asked my grandma, “Why do we play this way? There’s a much better way to play.” In response, she quickly explained her adamancy to the rules, what before had made no sense to me.

Her polished fingernails scratched against the cards as she shuffled them and told me. “Solitaire isn’t just a game for one person.” Her deep brown eyes sharply glanced at me, “No.” It wasn’t just a game for one person, but rather for two sides of a person. It was an internal battle, a strengthening of the mind. One playing against oneself. “If one side of you cheats, how would either side get better?”

Red lipsticked lips slightly grinned as my grandma saw me trying to understand, but I didn’t agree with this thought at once. The cards rhythmically slapped down onto the table as my grandmother, small yet stoic, effortlessly moved the cards with frail hands. I watched her. I thought about any other way to understand this idea. I desperately wanted to. Trying to think, I couldn’t imagine another instance where this sense of tranquility, bringing the melody of organization out of a cacophony of random cards, came from such intense competition.

The slow manipulation of life around her precedent made me think back to my grandma, to what she told me, and made me understand. Two years later, pushing myself harder than I ever had before in a field hockey match, I realized how much I had been cheating myself and my team by not putting this effort in before. Four years later, I was helping my parents clean after dinner when I saw the value in not taking the easy way out. Five years later, I found once again the difficult ease in pottery. Lifting the pot off the wheel, I found satisfaction. Looking back, I hadn’t realized that this notion of self-accountability appears in almost every aspect of my life.

Seven columns. Four aces. Fifty-two cards. Laying these down, I’m brought back to playing solitaire with my grandmother. Through time, her inner spirit never crumbled as her body began to deteriorate. Her mind stayed strong and proud. I admired her for that more than

she could've imagined. Each challenge I face, or will face, in life, I think back to her lesson one inconspicuous afternoon. Never let myself cheat. Always hold myself accountable. Work hard in every competition, especially the ones against myself, as those are the ones that better me the most. I did not understand what my grandmother meant that day. Now, with each day, I do more.

## Admissions Committee Comments

Many students want to share about an important person or family member in their life in their college essays. The challenge with this is making sure that the essay is still about the applicant, not just the important person. Elizabeth does a great job of incorporating that important person, her grandmother, while still keeping the focus on herself, what she learned from that specific moment, how that impacted her life. Additionally, although Elizabeth began by focussing on a childhood experience, she brought that back to her day-to-day life and how she incorporates accountability and hard work throughout. Understanding who Elizabeth is and her values, helps us understand who she will be in our campus community. She demonstrates her values of hard work and self-accountability are not limited to just solitaire but incorporated in sports, hobbies, her family life and are sure to shine through in her new communities on a college campus.

Dante

## Queen's Gambit

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*No, Dante. Stop, think, and look at the entire board.*

I was thoroughly confused. I thought I had procured the complete solution to this elaborate chess puzzle. *What am I missing? A knight fork, a bishop move? Am I in check?* After a quick glance at the left side of the board, I slapped my hand on my head as I suddenly realized what my chess coach was telling me. My queen was sitting unused, positioned all the way on the other side of the board, and I had no idea. If I were to sacrifice my queen, the opposing rook would be forced to capture it, allowing me to finish the game in style with the illustrious “smothered mate.”

*If you begin to look at the whole chessboard, then these puzzles will become a breeze for you.*

Ever since that chess lesson, those words have stuck. Indeed, my chess skills improved swiftly as my rating flew over the 1000 Elo threshold in a matter of months. However, those words did not merely pertain to chess. Looking at the whole picture became a foundational

skill that I have utilized throughout my life in school and other endeavors. I particularly remember making use of it on the soccer field.

Now, I'm no Arnold Schwarzenegger. Weighing in at a monstrous 125 pounds and standing 5 foot 8 inches, my opponents made it a habit to tackle me to the ground. Once again, I found myself face to face with the defender, and before I knew it, I crumbled to the ground, left isolated and dispossessed. Laying dazed on the pitch, my mind flashed back to the chessboard. It occurred to me that soccer, much like chess, relies on the proper position of the many pieces that combine to create a finished strategy. The "whole picture" of soccer is not just how fast or strong one is or how many tackles you put in; that is only one element of the puzzle. The intelligence and creativity needed in a playmaker is also an essential part of a well-rounded soccer team. I realized that my most significant advantage would always be my in-depth understanding of the game of soccer—where to pass the ball, when to make a run, if the ball should be in the air or driven. I picked myself off the ground, and when that same defender came barreling towards me again, I was zoned in, oblivious to the noise around me. I chipped the ball into the open space right behind him, knowing my teammate would run into the space without even looking. From then on, I continued to hone my skills through intense practice to become the best playmaker I could be, working in conjunction with my faster and stronger teammates to become a well-balanced, unified team.

Through chess and soccer, I have discovered that every piece in a puzzle has a purpose. This new perspective has enhanced my ability to stop, stand back, and analyze the whole picture in the many dimensions of my life. In my scientific studies, it was not enough to examine just one *C. reinhardtii* cell, but it was necessary to zoom out the microscope to capture all of the thousand cells to truly understand quorum sensing and its consequences. In my studies of music, it was not enough to listen to the melody of the finale of Beethoven's 9th symphony, but one must realize that the true beauty of the composition lies in the whole orchestra handing off this simple melody to every instrument. All these facets—music, research, soccer, chess—are not only completed puzzles but also parts of a greater whole: my life. Every aspect of myself matters as much as the other. As high school comes to an end, the pieces on my board are set, and I only have success in mind.

Your move.

#### Admissions Committee Comments

Dante's essay makes it clear to the reader that he is very curious and has many interests by showing more than telling. He thoughtfully connects the lessons he's learned from chess to his performance on the soccer field and does a great job of focusing on what he learned as opposed to a blow-by-blow recount of the entire chess match or soccer game. The reader is also able to see that Dante can apply what he learns in one subject to another, which is

essential to succeeding academically at Hopkins. Our admissions committee can read this essay and find clear evidence that Dante's way of thinking would help him thrive in our interdisciplinary curriculum.

Stella

## Left and Right Don't Exist

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The first lesson I learned as a student pilot is that left and right don't exist. Maybe driving on a highway or in a parking lot, left and right is precise enough to describe the location and movements of slow-moving bikers, pedestrians, and cars. But at 36,000 feet in the air in a steel tube hurdling almost 200 miles an hour? Left and right just don't cut it.

During one of my first flights in a small Cessna-182, my flight instructor ordered me to scan the horizon for approaching aircrafts. To my right, I caught a glimpse of one: another Cessna with maroon stripes, the sun's reflection glinting off its windows. Gesturing vaguely to my two o'clock, I informed my flying instructor, "There's a plane to the right."

"No, to *your* right. From his position, what direction does *he* see *you*?" From his angle, I was to his left. In that moment, I realized that perspective and precision of language is everything. The radio chirped: "Cessna One-Eight-Two Sandra, heading *north* to John Wayne Airport. Over."

I navigate using my compass's north, east, south, and west directions because every pilot's vantage point differs from each other both vertically and horizontally, creating opposite perspectives. My right was that pilot's left.

Through flying, I began to consider *all* points of view, regardless of my personal perspective.

Perhaps it was my ability to scan the horizon to communicate a single story, uniting contrasting outlooks, that drew me to my love for journalism and the diverse melting pot that was my community.

To me, journalism modernizes the ancient power of storytelling, filled with imperfect characters and intricate conflicts to which I am the narrator. As editor-in-chief for my school newspaper, *The Wildcat's Tale*, I aim to share the uncensored perspective of all students and encourage my editorial groups to talk — and listen — to those with whom they disagree. Starting each newspaper edition with a socratic, round-table discussion, I ask the other journalists to pursue stories that answer the questions: why did this happen and where will it lead?

Expanding beyond the perspectives of my classmates, I began writing articles for the Korea Daily, and later, the Los Angeles Times High School Insider. I schedule interviews with city council candidates, young and old voters, and mayors of my town, obtaining quotes and anecdotes to weave into my writing. My interviews with both Democratic and Republican voters have taught me to thoroughly report polarizing-opposite opinions through an unbiased lens. As a journalist, I realized I cannot presume the opinions of the reader, but instead simply provide them with the tools necessary to formulate their own conclusions.

However, differences in perspective in my articles are not solely limited to politics. I found that in my suburban community, people love to read about the small-town hospitality of their own friends and neighbors. Quirky traditions, like our Fourth of July carnival clown and local elementary school's Thanksgiving talent show, are equally as important to me as national headlines are. My favorite stories to publish are the ones taped onto fridges, proudly framed on the mom-and-pop downtown diner, or pinned into the corkboard in my teacher's classroom. I discovered the size of my story does not matter, but the impact I leave on the reader does.

In my time as both a student pilot and journalist, I grew to love these stories, the ones that showed me that living life with blinders, can not only be boring, but dangerous. Whether I was 36,000 feet in the air or on ground level, by flying and writing, I realized that the most interesting stories of life come straight from the people most different from me.

#### Admissions Committee Comments

Stella begins this essay by discussing her experience learning to fly. This anecdote, however, is less about the act itself as it is what the experience taught her in regards to perspective and points of view. She's then able to connect these takeaways to another aspect of her life – her love of journalism. As she shares more information about her approach and impact with journalism, she makes it clear that those lessons from flying are ever-present in her work. From listening to others' ideas and points of view in the newspaper editing room to looking at stories from a balanced and thoughtful perspective, we're able to learn a good deal about how she approaches not just her passions, but her community as well. This essay is able to add to the whole application by sharing with us some new passions and expanding on some of her impact, but its main focus is how she was able to apply lessons from one experience to other aspects of her life. As we think about what type of member Stella will be in our community, this essay helps us understand that she'll be someone willing to listen, learn, apply those learnings, and make an impact.

Dayann

## Dancing Together

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I cannot dance.

This is not something I often admit willingly; in fact, it is quite baffling to me how horribly incapable I am at performing even the most basic movements on command. My grandmother often describes it as “a tragedy” as she is forced to watch her grandchild absolutely butcher our country’s cultural dances, beautiful expressions of our unique West African roots turned into poor facsimiles by my robotic movements.

And yet, year after year, I find myself taking the dance floor at my family’s events, seemingly unaware of my objective lack of skill. Eventually, my display proves to be so amazingly unbearable that I am removed from the floor and shown the correct movements over and over again until I am able to replicate them well enough to come back. Bizarrely, despite my previous declaration that I cannot dance, for the past three years, I have found myself performing an entire choreographed routine at my school’s yearly pep rallies.

It is through looking back at these events that I realize that I have created a mischaracterization of my dancing abilities through my decisive first sentence. I can dance and am, in fact, very capable of doing so, but not when I act insularly. My ability to dance correlates directly with how willing I am to collaborate, the input and support of others turning the uncoordinated and unwieldy into the near-graceful.

My attempts at dancing have led me to value community and collaboration greatly, and I find myself seeking and being drawn towards environments that will allow me to continue to develop both of these values as I learn and grow. Through my internship with the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab, I was exposed to and became fascinated by the collaborative spirit that lies at the heart of Johns Hopkins. The idea that one cannot discover or innovate when working alone was affirmed during my research, and I have come to see that mutual collaboration and community are integral aspects of Johns Hopkins’ unique culture. From the research initiatives that breach the boundaries between class levels, to the many organizations such as the Tutorial Project, relying on the shared initiatives of different students to directly make an impact on Baltimore and its many communities, and the distinctive access to especially interdisciplinary topics such as neuromorphic systems, I view that Johns Hopkins exemplifies the peak of collaborative achievement in education.

#### Admissions Committee Comments

In Dayann’s essay, we learn a few things about him. First, he loves to participate. Despite his insistence that he cannot dance, we see him dancing throughout his essay. Second, he realizes that he can in fact dance, but needs to work with others to bring out the best in himself, and in the group. And third, he then is able to connect this to his future. He recognizes that in order to reach his potential, he wants to be at a place where he can collaborate with peers who can challenge him to be even better.

