

Name: _____

Cluster: _____

Sections (circle 1): AM PM

Integrating Specific Events and Big Picture to Write a Personal Essay

PURPOSE:

Applications often ask for personal statements that address a variety of prompts. These prompts can be tricky to answer successfully, because they usually require the writer to address a **big question** within the context of an **anecdote**. This writing exercise will allow you to practice that difficult task of combining a true story with a broader, more abstract truth about you.

Sample Application Prompt: *Describe a time when you faced adversity and explain what you learned from the experience.*

- “Describe a time” = Asks you to tell a story/ anecdote about a **specific event**
- “Explain what you learned” = Asks you to connect that story to the **big picture**, something that is more abstract and important.

PRACTICE:

Read the sample college application essay below. As you read, notice parts that refer to the **specific event** and parts that refer to the **big picture**. You will annotate the essay by color coding these sections.

COLOR CODE (mark your color beside the term it will indicate):

Specific event: _____

Big picture: _____

Excerpt from, “This essay got a high-school senior into 5 Ivy League schools and Stanford”

Abby Jackson, Business Insider Apr. 1, 2016, 7:25 PM

Prompt 1: Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Managing to break free from my mother’s grasp, I charged. With arms flailing and chubby legs fluttering beneath me, I was the ferocious two- year old rampaging through Costco on a Saturday morning. My mother’s eyes widened in horror as I jettisoned my churro; the cinnamon-sugar rocket gracefully sliced its way through the air while I continued my spree. I sprinted through the aisles, looking up in awe at the massive bulk products that towered over me. Overcome with wonder, I wanted to touch and taste, to stick my head into industrial-sized freezers, to explore every crevice. I was a conquistador, but rather than searching the land for El Dorado, I scoured aisles for free samples. Before inevitably being whisked

away into a shopping cart, I scaled a mountain of plush toys and surveyed the expanse that lay before me: the kingdom of Costco.

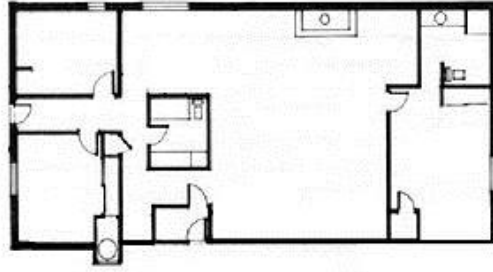
Notorious for its oversized portions and dollar-fifty hot dog combo, Costco is the apex of consumerism. From the days spent being toted around in a shopping cart to when I was finally tall enough to reach lofty sample trays, Costco has endured a steady presence throughout my life. As a veteran Costco shopper, I navigate the aisles of foodstuffs, thrusting the majority of my weight upon a generously filled shopping cart whose enormity juxtaposes my small frame. Over time, I've developed a habit of observing fellow patrons tote their carts piled with frozen burritos, cheese puffs, tubs of ice cream, and weight-loss supplements. Perusing the aisles gave me time to ponder. Who needs three pounds of sour cream? Was cultured yogurt any more well-mannered than its uncultured counterpart? Costco gave birth to my unfettered curiosity.

While enjoying an obligatory hot dog, I did not find myself thinking about the 'all beef' goodness that Costco boasted. I instead considered finitudes and infinitudes, unimagined uses for tubs of sour cream, the projectile motion of said tub when launched from an eighty foot shelf or maybe when pushed from a speedy cart by a scrawny seventeen year old. I contemplated the philosophical: If there exists a thirty-three ounce jar of Nutella, do we really have free will? I experienced a harsh physics lesson while observing a shopper who had no evident familiarity of inertia's workings. With a cart filled to overflowing, she made her way towards the sloped exit, continuing to push and push while steadily losing control until the cart escaped her and went crashing into a concrete column, 52" plasma screen TV and all. Purchasing the yuletide hickory smoked ham inevitably led to a conversation between my father and me about Andrew Jackson's controversiality. There was no questioning Old Hickory's dedication; he was steadfast in his beliefs and pursuits – qualities I am compelled to admire, yet his morals were crooked. We both found the ham to be more likeable—and tender.

I adopted my exploratory skills, fine tuned by Costco, towards my intellectual endeavors. Just as I sampled buffalo-chicken dip or chocolate truffles, I probed the realms of history, dance and biology, all in pursuit of the ideal cart—one overflowing with theoretical situations and notions both silly and serious. I sampled calculus, cross-country running, scientific research, all of which are now household favorites. With cart in hand, I do what scares me; I absorb the warehouse that is the world. Whether it be through attempting aerial yoga, learning how to chart blackbody radiation using astronomical software, or dancing in front of hundreds of people, I am compelled to try any activity that interests me in the slightest.

My intense desire to know, to explore beyond the bounds of rational thought; this is what defines me. Costco fuels my insatiability and cultivates curiosity within me at a cellular level. Encoded to immerse myself in the unknown, I find it difficult to complacently accept the "what"; I want to hunt for the "whys" and dissect the "hows". In essence, I subsist on discovery.

DIRECTIONS:



1. Draw a bird's eye map of your home or another familiar place where you've spent a lot of time (current home, past home, school, or workplace, for example).
2. On your map, write notes on events that took place in different parts of the home. Note at least 3 events. (For example, in the kitchen where you shoved your beanie baby down the sink and broke the garbage disposal.)
3. Take a few minutes to look over your map and noted events. Why do you remember those events? Jot down notes on why that memory is important to you. Think about the **big picture**.
4. Choose one event on the map that holds importance, and think about how you can connect the **specific event** to the **big picture**. (For example, you watched your mom fix the garbage disposal, which led you to become interested in learning how to fix things **OR** losing your beanie baby led you to realize your childhood would not last forever, and you learned to enjoy it while it lasts.)

You will write a short personal essay that integrates the story of the **specific event** and the **big picture**. This essay should communicate something important about YOU.

5. Be ready to share what you wrote.

THE BASIC INGREDIENTS OF A PERSONAL ESSAY:

Specific event: memory; sensory details that create "story"

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Big picture: why this story matters or makes a lasting impression