

Writing Effective College Application Essays

With early application deadlines upon us, guidance counselors, professors, and admissions consultants slipped Kathleen Kingsbury seven essays that helped get kids into top schools last year—and she examines exactly what they did right.

Scoring the winning touchdown. Volunteering for blood drives or building houses. What you learned about poverty on your \$9,000 trip to Africa.

These are a few topics on independent consultant Arun Ponnusamy's list of what not to write about in your college application essay. (A few more: Don't write about mom and dad's divorce, and no general philosophizing—you're 17, get over yourself.) Admissions season is under way, and with early applications deadlines starting November 1, you've only got a few more days to polish your make-or-break essay. Straight As and stellar SAT scores won't be enough. In a year where 10 brilliant kids are vying for every one slot at your average Ivy League school (yes, that statistic is accurate), the personal essay has become a tipping point that can turn a deferral into an acceptance letter.

So The Daily Beast tracked down seven college admissions essays that *did* work—seven essays that helped get the kids who wrote them into one of the country's top schools. The essays were slipped to us by college professors, high-school guidance counselors, independent admissions consultants, and even staffers at student newspapers. For confidentiality reasons, admissions officers can't talk about these essays expressly, so we chose essays that demonstrate the most salient principles to abide by when writing them. (Scroll down to read the essays, unedited and in full.)

You'll need the help: Competition at these schools is fiercer than ever. For every kid who's hung prayer flags on a mountain summit in Tibet, there are a dozen others who've studied a Bantu language in Rwanda, worked with Guatemalan orphans, cooked with a celebrity chef, or been on reality TV. "To be honest," says Ponnusamy, "if you're thinking about the most selective of schools in the country and the most interesting thing in your life is your parents' divorce, you're not going to get in anyway."

But even if your life hasn't been filled with experiences worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster, you can salvage an essay about a ho-hum subject by having a novelist's eye for detail. For Greg Roberts, the admissions dean at University of Virginia, one of the most memorable essays he read was about a single at-bat in a high-school baseball game. The applicant wasn't the star of the team, Roberts remembers, and didn't even like playing baseball much. "But he talked about being nervous and excited at the same time, about how the freshly cut grass reminded him of his grandfather," Roberts says. "I just felt like I knew him."

Roberts worries that students tend to be too conservative with essays and are afraid to take risks. "There are no wrong answers here, and the last thing you want is a dry or boring essay," he says. "We have 22,000 applications, so it's easy to blend into the crowd."

- This year that may mean students want to reconsider before giving their take on the recent financial meltdown or the national health-care debate. At California's Pomona College, the admissions staff anticipates an influx of essays on the economy, similar to what they saw post-September 11, 2001, when nearly half the applications essays dealt with the terrorist attacks.

“But it’s a different story if you watched the towers collapse from science class at [New York City’s] Stuyvesant High School than if you live on a farm in Iowa,” Pomona’s admissions dean Bruce Poch says. “Families are going through hell right now, and it’s the very personal experiences that will resonate the most.” Then again, Poch adds, “Sympathy isn’t the only reason we let kids in.”

Despite what admissions guidebooks tell you, there's no surefire formula to the college essay. Poch confesses even a small error or two will not necessarily kill your chances of getting in—as long as it's not on purpose. "I once heard one [essay-writing] professional brag about slipping in mistakes to throw off admissions officers," he says. "That's just disgusting."

Rule #1: When Tackling a Global Issue, Make it Personal

Brown Freshman Nawal Traish could have chosen to write about U.S. relations with Libya or general unrest in the Muslim world. Instead, she speaks to her personal relationship with Libya, her father's homeland, and her own understanding of her Islamic faith. "It's a mistake for students to think that they have to come up with any deep or life-altering topic," says University of Virginia's Greg Roberts, who expects to read essays this year on Afghanistan, health care, and other hot political issues. Instead, Roberts advises, "It's OK to take on serious topics, but tell us how it relates directly back to you." ([Click here to read Nawal's essay.](#))

Rule #2: Show That You Have Some Perspective

Hallie Jordan knew not to pretend she'd had a hard-knock life with no options. If you're a white, middle-class kid, it never hurts to show that you realize how lucky you are—and that you sought out diversity. "I remember in the days after [Hurricane] Katrina, I had an otherwise thoughtful and engaged kid sitting across from me bemoaning how the kids in New Orleans were 'going to have awesome essays,'" says Ponnusamy. "This sense amongst upper-middle-class kids that 'nothing bad has ever happened to me' is always amusing. I don't care who it is, they all have 750 words of something compelling to say to an admissions officer." He adds, "They need to relax, think about what means a lot to them or gets them fired up, and then write about it." ([Click here to read Hallie's essay.](#))

Rule #3: Essays Succeed or Fail in the Details

The "hand-cranked" ice cream. The Richard Serra installation. The baby clothes she cut up and made into a quilt. The essay that got Isabel Polon into Yale swells with appealing and insightful details that show her meticulous nature. "If the essay mentions you going to dinner, I want to know what you were eating," says Ponnusamy. Adds UVA's Roberts: "A standout essay starts with good writing. Be as descriptive as possible about the moment you're writing—we want to see it, smell it, touch it." ([Click here to read Isabel's essay.](#))

Rule #4: Make Sure You're the Hero of the Story

By emphasizing her own personal challenges and then showing how she wouldn't allow them to subsume her, Hannah Edwards was able to make herself look good without bragging. "It's fine to talk about your dad being a coke fiend or your stint in rehab with your favorite WB crush," Ponnusamy says, "but unless you end up as the 'hero' in the essay, you will have done nothing to help you and it's the one place you're guaranteed to have the opportunity to speak in the first-person." ([Click here to read Hannah's essay.](#))

Rule #5: Make Your Intellectual Curiosity Clear

Rahul Kishore wanted Cornell to know how obsessively devoted he was to science, and his essay describes in great detail his fascination. "Talking about something meaningful can make you more likeable," says independent college consultant Stephen Friedfeld, "but it has to be executed to demonstrate your academic rigor." ([Click here to read Rahul's essay.](#))

Rule #6: Know Your Audience

Morgan Doff wasn't applying to a Christian school or one in an area that might take offense to his lack of interest in religion, so he put it right out there on the page. "Students regularly conjure up who admissions officers are, what they look like and what they're interested in," says Pomona's Bruce Poch. "We purposely have a diverse staff with a variety of interests and backgrounds." That said, had Morgan been applying to, say, a school in the Deep South, he might have chosen his words more carefully. ([Click here to read Morgan's essay.](#))

Rule #7: Don't Be Afraid to Show You're Not Perfect

Abigail Hook was applying to Harvard—the one school you don't want to tilt your hand near. And yet she chose to write her essay about giving up on ballet, rather than persevering once she'd tired of it. "It's OK to let down your guard, not be safe and sanitized," says Poch. "It can allow us to relate to you as a real human being." ([Click here to read Abigail's essay.](#))

Nawal Traish
Brown University
Class of 2013

One glance out the window, where palm trees swayed as cars sped by, and I could have been at LAX. But when my gaze shifted to meet that of Muammar al Gadhafi behind his signature aviator sunglasses, I knew I was more than a few smoggy miles from Tinseltown. The larger-than-life portrait of the Libyan dictator sent chills down my spine, and I almost didn't hear my older sister telling me to follow her through the customs line in her broken Arabic. Fumbling for a safety pin, I quickly converted my neck scarf into a traditional headscarf, unaware that my views on diversity would soon undergo a similar transformation as I assimilated into Libyan culture for two weeks.

It was my first time entering the country my father fled thirty years before due to political upheaval involving the man staring at me from the wall, and while I had met my paternal relatives as a child, I was apprehensive about doing so in their own country now that I had matured into a very American teenage girl. My siblings and I were raised as Muslims, but we adhere selectively to the various practices—fasting during Ramadan but not praying five times a day, attending the mosque but not covering our heads in public, and I sometimes feel guilty about wanting to handpick from both worlds—an American lifestyle but Islamic beliefs—because they are often seen as irreconcilable.

From the moment we touched down on Libyan sand, I saw that others didn't have the same luxury of separating lifestyle from beliefs if they so wished. The call to prayer every morning at 4:30 left me sleep-deprived but more in awe at the homogeneity of the country's devotion; the haunting Arabic wail penetrated the pre-dawn sky from minarets at every corner the same way McDonald's jingles infiltrate American living rooms. The Mediterranean heat was oppressive under long-sleeve shirts and pants in early August, when I'm used to wearing shorts and T-shirts, but the fact that everyone else was donning the same conservative dress made me feel like I was part of something larger than myself and more important than the latest Pac-Sun fashions. However, as I constantly adjusted my head cover, I seriously questioned the rationale behind some of the cultural and religious practices I witnessed. I deeply admired the connection to their religion that my relatives showed, stopping to prostrate in prayer even at the beach, but also wondered whether the internal belief of five million Libyans could possibly be as parallel as their outward expressions of it.

Being in Libya impressed upon me that it is often such circumstantial, unchosen factors as place of birth that largely determine the paradigms by which we live our lives. As much as I enjoyed the exotic experience of being in North Africa and the not-so-exotic experience of reconnecting with my family, my time in Libya paradoxically strengthened the latter half of my Arab-American identity. I had taken for granted the fact that we are free to practice Islam the way we want here in the U.S. next to neighbors lighting menorahs and friends who are atheists, and upon my return to Boston I found myself immediately appreciating this diversity at a new level, starting with the group of strangers with whom we waited at baggage claim. We all shared frustration and eyes peeled for our suitcases, but fortunately, not much else. As I pursue my passions of philosophy and theology as an undergraduate, I will approach with a more open mind the vast array of angles from which people view the world now that I have experienced life in a country so different from the one I call home, yet one that has inevitably shaped my own perspectives as I've grown up.

Hallie Jordan
Rice University
Class of 2012

Standing on the second floor hall of my high school, I watch my fellow students swarm into the campus as the bell rings for the passing period. Leaning against the railing, observing, I reflect on how my life might be different had I chosen to attend a different high school. The scene below me feels like a little slice of the real world. A couple walks by and my ear quickly notices that they speak in Korean. I spot my Ethiopian friend Ike, almost dancing, as he moves through

the crowd on the floor below me; his real name is so long no one can pronounce it. Later, my best friend will present me with some homemade Mexican Christmas ponche full of sugarcane to chew on. I reluctantly stop people watching and proceed to class. It always nice to stop and imagine all the different cultures and backgrounds can be found at my small school of barely 2,000 people. Everyone, I have realized, has their own distinct way of life defined by various situations from trying to succeed as a first generation immigrant to working to help their family make ends meet each month. There is nothing sheltered about Spring Woods High School.

Unlike many of my friends, I am a “privileged child.” I was born an American citizen. My parents have steady jobs. I live in a neighborhood zoned, if only barely, to a school called Memorial High School—the shiny, rich abundant school of the district. From my early childhood my parents had planned on me attending this high school, as supposedly it provides one of the best public school educations in Houston. At the end of 8th grade, a pivotal moment presented itself: I had to decide between the touted Memorial High School with all its benefits and clout or the “ghetto” Spring Woods where most of my closest friends were going. After much debate I finally settled on Spring Woods. Coming from a very small charter middle school, high school was rather shocking. I did not like it, and I blamed my unhappiness on my school—I thought I had made the “wrong decision.” At the beginning of the second semester, I choose to switch to the school I was supposed to go to—feeling that I would receive a “better” education.

On my first day I was astounded by the other kids. They all looked and acted alike. Almost all had the same clothing, hair styles, necklaces, flip-flops and backpacks with their names monographed on them. Nearly all of them also had iPods, this was almost four years ago when it was not so common to see iPods everywhere. I was amazed at how they treated their iPods so carelessly, when I have a friend who carefully saved her lunch money for months just to be able to buy one. Needless to say, she is very protective of it. Sitting in the cafeteria, I felt like I was back in fifth grade. Everyone brought nice neat little lunches, packet perfectly in expensive lunch boxes. Mothers stood at the lunch line selling cookies to raise money for various organizations, as stay at home moms they had nothing else to do with their time. Buying a school lunch, I found, was something only the “reject” kids did. I lasted only a week at this place. Suddenly I missed everything from Spring Woods, even its “ghetto” identity. I missed the teachers who taught about ideas instead of forcing us to merely memorize. I missed the general accepting feeling that comes from such a heterogeneous mixture of people. There are no “reject” kids at Spring Woods. I could now see that though.

Isabel Polon
Yale
Class of 2011

In kindergarten, I was the only kid who knew milk didn't originate in the supermarket. This I attribute to my time at Emandal, a family-run farm that has opened its gates each summer since 1908 to those seeking an alternative vacation.

For the past 13 years my family has made the pilgrimage to Willits, California, to spend the second week of August at Emandal. What inspires a family to spend their hard-earned cash picking vegetables or milking cows while residing in prehistoric cabins without indoor plumbing? Well, only at Emandal can I husk corn at 5 p.m. to find it steaming on the dinner table at 6:30. Nowhere else do 13-year-old boys agree to square dance with their mothers or take the time to realize the solitude in knitting. It's the only place where the national college debate champion enjoys the company of his oldest friend, a videogame-dependent junior college student who subsists on red meat, Coca-Cola and Red Vines. It's where Berkeley yuppies and working class Oaklanders bake Snickerdoodles while discussing who's gotten pregnant or divorced since last summer. At Emandal there are no social boundaries, no class distinctions. Any cabin's the same as the one next-door.

It's the satisfaction I came to associate with Emandal's hands-on reality that inspired me to mark "agriculture" as my freshman PSAT preferred major. Following months of bombardment with pamphlets from Iowa State, I came to the conclusion that I wasn't going to "live off the land." Without a local bookstore, Pad-Thai or a Richard Serra installation, my life would definitely be lacking some favored flourishes. But even in LA, Emandal has developed into a sort of Jiminy Cricket I interplay with daily. At Emandal, if there's extra milk we drink hot chocolate. If fried chicken remains from dinner last night, you can count on it mysteriously resurfacing as Chicken Curry at lunch.

My boyfriend refers to me as "the doggy-bag-date." I print rough drafts on the reverse side of harp music from last year's winter concert. When my mother threatened to give away my baby clothes, I cut them up and made my sister a quilt for her birthday. Emandal's compost lifestyle has caused me to realize creative forms of recycling beyond cans and cereal boxes, and embrace resourcefulness in every pursuit.

But the best part of Emandal is the food. With fresh bread at every meal, heirloom tomatoes the size of my head, hand-cranked ice cream over pie made from Emandal's wild blackberries, no one refrains from unbuttoning their pants after dinner. But it's the ideology behind the menu that makes it all the more appealing: the tangible connection with the food you eat. Long before the farmer's market fad, my family went religiously each Saturday. We exchange CDs with Joel the carrot guy and the Japanese greens lady saves us the last bag of cucumbers. It's a unique satisfaction and an exceedingly rare connection to be able to shake the hand of the person who grows your food, and in effect, "grew you".

In my 13th year, when I had reached the stage where crucifixion was preferable to being seen with my parents, they asked whether I still wanted to go to Emandal. Thank goodness something

inside of me was still smart enough to say yes. For it is there I have deduced what's essential to harmonious living with our earth and all kinds of folks, erudition I can attribute only to Emandal.

Hannah Edwards
UC-Berkeley
Class of 2013

“Beautiful. B to the back, b to the back. So b first. beautiful. Next, it's that French thing. Gosh ... Uea, no e ... a ... u. Eau. So beau. Beautiful. Ti. That's easy. Beauti. Beautiful. Full. No not full: ful. They chop that l off, so b-eau-ti-ful.”

I've just spent 30 seconds agonizing over how to spell one of the more basic words in the English language and a good part of that time trying to remember how to write the letter b. That sequence is partially a flash back to a fourth grade spelling test, but honestly, it's a thought process I will have to go through about a hundred times this year with equally basic words because I am, and always will be, dyslexic.

I have never been able to spell, but it wasn't until 4th grade that I found out the, ironically hard to spell, word for my condition. When everyone did realize what was going on and why it was that I got Cs in spelling, I was packed off to resource room (i.e. Special Ed) to learn how to write pretty.

At first I liked it. Resource room gave me an excuse not to do well in spelling, and it let me spend class time doing silly spelling exercises. It let me avoid my problem and at the same time pretend I was doing something to correct it, but in all honesty it was just a waste of time. I didn't want to recognize its futility at first, but eventually I couldn't ignore it and had to come to terms with the fact that resource room was aspirin for a broken arm: It made things seem a bit better, but it did nothing to fix the problem. When I came to terms with this I convinced my mother to take me out of resource room and that I could take responsibility for my own problem, and that is exactly what I did, and have done ever since.

I was freed from resource room on the condition that I get A's on every other spelling test that year, which I did. Since then I have realized that I can never allow myself to live life in a metaphorical resource room. I must take accountability and responsibility for myself, and not accept special treatment where there is anyway I can avoid it. This philosophy was tested last year when I was signing up for the SAT.

My mother was handing over her credit card when she asked me if I thought extra time would be useful on the SAT.

“Well, yeah,” I said smiling as I took her credit card, “that essay is insane, 25 minutes makes for some nasty results.”

“Why don't you apply to get some extra time? If it will help you should,” she suggested, “you're eligible.”

“No. It’s an artificial compensation that would only last as long as schools are forced to provide it; the real world can’t make those kind of concessions so I can’t take that crutch.”

My mother offered no resistance to my stance and I typed in her AmEx number while I reflected on the implications of my denial. I have spent a lot of time agonizing over how to spell the simplest words, and I doubt anyone has quite attained my level of red underlines in a word document, but that just means checking the dictionary and an age spent poring over SpellCheck. I have never taken extra time or other benefits on standardized tests and I never will, because that is not how I want to succeed. I want to sink or swim on my own and not use water wings to get through the world. I don’t want to do well for someone with dyslexia; I want to do well period. At this point my inability to spell is more of a punchline to my friends’ jokes than a disability and I am determined to keep it that way, because I have worked too hard to let something so trivial in the grand scheme define me.

Rahul Kishore
Cornell University
Class of 2012

Complexity. Life is complex all the way down to the atomic level. Organ systems comprised of bits of tissue, formed by cells, made up of organelles, formed by carbon compounds. Throughout high school, I have been fascinated by the complexity of life. The relationships between micro organism and macro organism, and how nature, by trial and error, has created structures that allow us to hear, feel, and see.

My freshman biology teacher inspired me to think of the human body not simply as a single structure, but rather the mesh of different systems, working together to produce life. The human body, I realized, is beautiful in its complexity and cohesiveness. An organism was no longer just an animal, it was a complex machine comprised of millions of parts. I saw vivid pictures of organ systems neatly packed into organisms to meet their function.

I pursued my passion for science outside of textbooks. I shadowed the chief of cardiothoracic surgery at Kaiser Permanente San Francisco, standing next to him as he performed a triple bypass. Most of the operating room was consumed by the heart and lung machine, a device designed to replace the body’s own heart and lungs during a surgery while both organs are temporarily shut down. The machine is infinitely larger than the actual organs, giving me a greater appreciation for how much each organ is expected to do. Since my experience in the operating room, I have volunteered at Stanford University Medical Center. During my first summer, a pathologist showed me a seemingly empty petri dish, swabbed it with a QTip and made a slide and put it under the microscope. The images I saw were amazing—thousands of microscopic organisms, moving together in large colonies. I realized that life could be as simple and small as a bacterium or as large and complex as a human being.

“Any Person, Any Study” is what I have been told by alumni from Cornell. The famous quote by Erza Cornell best describes the opportunities that Cornell provides. But for me, “Any Person, Any Study” means something very different. Cornell University has a long academic tradition of

teaching the young and hopeful minds of a new generation the beauty of education. Cornell graduates question, they analyze, they comprehend.

Cornell for me is something more than just a university or an opportunity to further my understanding of Biology. Cornell is an opportunity to realize truths about the world, and about every field of learning. I see Cornell as a chance to expand the horizons of my thought, to think about the world as a bigger place, to think about its problems in a logical way, and see life as an opportunity to understand the world around us. A Cornell education provides a basis in many things, the ability to draw conclusions from Locke, Kant, or Smith, and use these ideas in conjunction with an in depth knowledge of one topic to excel in a field. Cornell will provide me the opportunity to understand Biology in an uncommon way. Cornell is a place to discover a new way of thinking, and also a place to find passion for a study. I want to learn about Biology beyond a textbook. I want to make those discoveries at Cornell.

Morgan Doff
Reed College
Class of 2010

“Morgan, say it slower and pronounce each word.”

I breathed deeply and began again. “If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, / Or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch, / If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you . . .”

When I was 6 years old, I had a slight speech impediment that made me far too shy to read aloud in front of my peers. My father immediately decided the only way for me to overcome my fear would be to practice reading out loud. Every day, my father and I sat together, and I read to him. After a few days of children’s books, my father—sick of listening to fairytales—gave me a book of poems. I read Kipling’s “If” over and over to him, and it became my favorite poem. I was incredibly grateful to him for not only helping me to overcome my fear of public reading but also for instilling in me a love of reading and words.

This love was consuming and when I was 12, I saw another child wearing a bracelet that read, “WWJD.” Excited, I asked if it referred in some way to JD Salinger, and if so, did the bracelet pertain to one character in particular? Maybe Holden? Franny? The other child just looked at me baffled and said, “It means, ‘What Would Jesus Do.’” I turned away sheepishly, as apparently my knowledge of literature had surpassed my awareness of religious catchphrases.

However, occurrences like these didn’t deter me from a zealous approach to reading. The more I learned to appreciate the beauty in a beginning, middle, and end of a story, the more I felt a desire to create my own. Now, I’m a storyteller—a far departure from my days of near silence. I like to play with words. I love knowing that everyone is listening to my story. In my writing, I’m honest; I don’t hide anything; I don’t want it to be guarded. I want my stories to demonstrate imperfection, because I believe it makes my writing more realistic. When I read words with a similarly imperfect tone, I feel comforted, knowing that someone else has felt the same way I have.

In my writing, I strive to infuse another kind of comfort as well—the reassuring feeling that comes when someone overhears what you are saying and agrees with you. I was once in a hotel elevator in France, complaining to my sister about how I had gotten lost earlier that day, and recounting wandering aimlessly in Paris and not speaking the native language. I was shocked when suddenly, a beautiful woman on the elevator said, “Pas le bien-aimé d’inquiétude, je me suis perdu une fois dans Amérique, je sais la sensation.”

I began to cry, because I knew she was trying to be helpful, and at the sight of my tears, the woman quickly said in perfect English, “Don’t worry sweetheart, I once got lost in America. I know the feeling.” To this day, I still clearly remember the feeling of relief that the stranger’s words gave me. I knew that I wasn’t the only person to ever feel overwhelmed in a foreign place or situation. I strive to capture that feeling—the soothing sense of comfort that the stranger gave me—in my writing.

I still sit and read aloud to my father. We sit on the same burgundy velvet sofa, my father on the left, and I as close to him as possible. The only differences are that now, he complains that I’m “too big to sit on his lap,” and that we no longer read fairytales or Kipling, but my stories instead.

Abigail Hook
Harvard University Class of 2013

This past summer I was poised to jump. I was sure. I had convinced not only myself, but everyone around me that I was done. Come end of summer, I would pack away hundreds of pointe shoes in dejected cardboard boxes and they would instantly transform into unwanted memorabilia, identified only by a careless scrawl of Sharpie. My sweat and dedication were to be laid aside. I was through with pain, through with foot surgeries and obsessions and disappointments, and saying goodbye to a lifelong pursuit of ballet would be no exception. After the usual last six weeks of intensive summer training, my *adieux* were to be quick and painless; I would make sure of it.

And then *Serenade* happened to me.

Having made up my mind, I loyally warded off anything that might jeopardize my decision. My usual passion and enthusiastic spark were gone, replaced by a deep longing to understand why exactly I had ever fallen in love with this painful profession and an intense need for stability when my world was moving out from beneath my sore feet. *Serenade* took the remains of me, a frustrated and tired dancer whose only instinct was to fight, and gently illuminated the silver lining in my painful disaster.

My first exposure to the piece came from the splintery wood cabinet in the corner of the studio. I never liked using the sound system. Growing up in an intensely musical family who preferred to sing the nightly prayer, recordings frustrated me. Tonight the ribbons on my pointe shoes were as frayed as my sanity, and I was trying desperately to get motivated. Ballet had taught me from an early age that pain is only in the mind, and motivation is only a matter of psychological tricks. This ideology was working well for me, until I heard *it*. My sense of stoicism was instantly

shattered. Something was amiss. I had witnessed my fair share of beautiful music and never cried. Yet *Serenade for Strings in C Major* sounded nothing like the *Nutcracker* or *Swan Lake*. The music was weeping and soaring and tired and energetic and everything, *everything* I was feeling. And that made all the difference. *Serenade* reminded me that beauty existed in the “why” of my pursuit of perfection; why I had done *this*—this crazy-overworked dream of a thing—and why I knew I would treasure it for the rest of my life.

Then I started dancing. George Balanchine somehow has captured the ephemeral, tragic side of beauty that *Serenade* sang of and transformed it into living art, and for a few weeks, I was his medium. For the first time I could remember I was looking forward to rehearsal at the end of eight-hour days; to those first few measures of music in which 17 girls simply stood, each hand raised to heaven, eyes searching through divine stratosphere, their light blue tulle—angelic. As the curtain rose opening night, the audience let out a murmur—a subtle appreciation for beauty in the raw. For weeks afterward I would enthusiastically lend my iPod to friends, brightly anticipating that they too would experience a revelation. I was mildly disappointed. For the most part they would smile sympathetically and say, “Oh yes, isn’t it beautiful?” and move on.

But then I realized, amidst my confusion, that the reassurance, the hope that I hadn’t just wasted my childhood, was something I so uniquely needed. Yes the music and choreography were genius, but *Serenade*’s magic lay in the ability it had to nudge me from frustrated to appreciative, from grief to celebration.

Perhaps Balanchine had seen this doubt, this questioning in a student before. Or perhaps this is how art works: One will never understand the power it has for the individual but not his neighbor, for the dancer but not the audience member, for the mother but not the daughter. I do know the experience of becoming that music—what seemed *my* story this summer—was paramount in my understanding of the person ballet has made me, and even when it came time to hang up my pointe shoes in exchange for a college education, *Serenade* reminded me of the power of pursuing a dream and the gifts that come with saying goodbye.

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