

EVOLUTION OF AN ESSAY

ne college requests in a supplement, "Please share with us what you believe other students would learn from you, both inside and outside the classroom."

Tough assignment. The temptation to pretend to be something you're not or to recite your accomplishments, is almost overwhelming. What can you say? "I hope other students will learn from me the values of hard work and fun as well." Ugh. It leads easily to the Jock or the 3D essay. One young woman a number of years ago, knowing the traps buried in the assignment, began by leafing through her notebook. She came across an entry that seems quaint to us today, though its idea and spirit are very contemporary:

My sister is a kick. Seven years old, and she's the only one who knows how to run the VCR. So now she wants one of her own for Christmas. Whatever happened to AM-FM radio for kids? At her age I thought fiddling around with the wires to get a clear picture on *The Brady Bunch* was pretty good. Mom is out of it, can't even deal with cable, can't get her radio to work without static. Sister's already working on computers in school. I feel bad for Mom—some of the stuff even I can't figure out. New technology is fine, I guess, given the fact that

I like old movies on the VCR too, but there has to be something else. What? I don't know. Bike trips?

Using this as a starting point, she wrote a draft:

When I asked my seven-year-old sister what she wanted for Christmas last year, her answer was short, simple and automatic. "Uh . . . Get-In-Shape-Girls, My Little Pony and a VCR."

I can remember the days (and hey—that's not so long ago) when it was crazy for kids to want even a cassette recorder. AM-FM radio was about as far as any of us got. As for television, I used to think I was a big shot because I knew just which wire to twist to erase the fuzzy-static sound that was forever drowning out the entire Brady Bunch. But now my seven-year-old sister is the one who teaches the rest of us about the latest technology. She is official keeper of the VCR. That's because she's the only one who *really* knows how to make it do all the things it's designed to. Mom, meanwhile, still can't tune in her favorite radio station on our Casio Supreme Stereo, and she's helpless when faced with the mesmerizing, ominous "Cable Box." A few months ago I watched my sister try to show Mom which buttons to push to record a TV show that would be on later that day. The generation gap is getting wider in our house, byte by byte, chip by chip.

So one of the things my future classmates will not be learning from me is how to adjust to changes in home entertainment. They'll have to see my sister for that. I'm just too old to understand.

I've also learned a few other things from my sister. Last summer we flew from New York to London in only six hours, which didn't make much of an impression on my sister. She didn't understand why it took so *long*. From my point of view, the ride was a far cry from spectacular; the cabin was cramped, the wallpaper and seat coverings

were dizzying, the air was clogged by the stench of old sneakers and formaldehyde, the food (?) was disgusting, and somewhere along the line I lost five hours of my life. Where that time went I'll never understand, but at least it had the decency to come back four weeks later, upon my return home.

When she had gotten this far, the writer stopped to ask, Where am I? She originally wanted to say she hoped other students might learn from her how much fun bike trips and the outdoors could be, as opposed to the kind of prepackaged entertainment she saw around her all the time. Anyway, she knew she had nothing against the VCR—she liked it in fact. But in avoiding the dumb sounding "I hope people learn from me that bike trips are fun," she had gotten off the track, writing about her sister and their different attitudes. She was not getting very quickly to what other students would learn from her in college. Where did this airplane business lead? She could start revising sections now—that would be one way to try to pick up the thread of the main idea—but it was too soon for that. Since she was rolling along toward her bike story, she decided to get it out and see where it led:

I have also ridden a bicycle across Canada, 750 miles in 28 days, during which time it rained for two weeks straight. Needless to say, I learned to appreciate the sun. As it happens, I also learned to enjoy the rain. My journey was slow, yes. But it was refreshing (there is a small brook in Algonquin Park with water so cold it could chill a penguin), informative (an old man in Whitney Ontario will tell you more about trout fishing than you'll ever want to know), and far more beautiful (from the soft evergreens lining Fodder Pond to the hard cobblestone streets in Old Quebec) than any voyage through darkness in an oblong metal box could ever hope to be.

I am no naturalist; I don't eat bark. I like junk food as much as the next person, and I am the first to run to the video shop when my family wants a movie for that VCR. But I have discovered along the way that one thing does not have to exclude the other. I can only teach people that which I myself have already learned. And I would take pride in showing someone first hand that popcorn tastes just as good while you're watching a sunset from a mountaintop as it does while you're watching an old movie.

This draft has many merits. The writer has observed carefully and much of the writing is alive. But it's not coherent—it's like two different essays, one about TV and VCRs and technology, the other about learning and teaching and her family. But she knew she didn't have time for two different essays. She tried to find ways to connect them, or cut one out, which meant thinking about the lead and the end, and what the connection might be. She was thinking of shape.

The end seemed fine for the time being. But the lead, even though it was anecdotal, didn't lead anywhere. She cut the original opening and tried a few new ones:

I used to think I was a big shot because I knew just which wire to twist to erase the fuzzy-static sound that was forever drowning out the entire Brady Bunch.

Or:

There are a few things my classmates *won't* learn from me.

She thought the last one was good because it got into the teaching and learning idea—the point of the assignment, after all—quickly. A little negative, though. She hunted in her ending for another lead that might do the trick differently: "I can only teach that which I myself have already

learned." And seeing this line, she couldn't help improving it: "I can only teach what I have already learned."

Then, thinking of her sister again, she added: ". . . which seems to be shrinking compared to what everyone else knows."

She tried keeping the learning idea but starting with her sister:

In my life I have many teachers and a mother who likes to lecture, but it's my sister, age seven, who does most of the teaching.

Working on the lead made her start to understand what her essay might be about. And thinking of her sister at the beginning made her think of the ending, and how far away she had gotten from her sister. She liked writing about her sister and thought it would be good to shape the essay around her, if possible. But how to get back to her? The writer changed the last line to:

And I would take pride in showing someone (maybe even my sister when she's old enough) first hand that popcorn tastes just as good while you're watching a sunset from a mountaintop as it does while you're watching an old movie.

Something good was beginning to happen. But she also worried about the middle of the essay. The travel stories wandered. Could she find something in the beginning and the end that might bind the middle? Young sister, the writer feeling so old by comparison, technology, movies, popcorn, teaching and learning?

Seeing the vague "other things" in the first sentence of the airplane paragraph, she changed it to:

I've also learned how to take other technology for granted from my sister.

And at the end of that paragraph, picking up on the time idea:

I wondered if I kept flying east, would I get younger and younger (and eventually understand things)?

That was a funny idea—that people might actually know less and less as they approached twenty-one. It wasn't serious, of course, but it might be a good connection to what her sister and maybe her classmates could learn from her—an idea she was already trying to bring out at the end.

Then she thought of beginning the next-to-last paragraph with this:

Without my sister, I have also ridden . . .

Which quickly developed into:

There are a few things I haven't been too old to learn on my own, though. While my sister went to camp, I rode a bicycle . . .

Where was all this going? Did she have a main idea? She tried stating it: "Someone might learn from me that there are things worth more than the latest gadget." But it wasn't that bike trips were *worth* more than VCRs. Maybe, "Someone might learn from me about pleasures at least as satisfying as the latest gadget." Or something like that. She'd come back to it.

Now, with her destination getting clearer, she hoped honing some sentences would make the whole idea sharper in her mind. Already she had changed "fuzzy static sound" to "static." She substituted the single, exact "alien" for the two words "mesmerizing, ominous," as well as "widening" for "getting wider." (Weak use of "get"; remember?) She deleted "that would be on later that day" as unnecessary. She also changed "upon my return" (too formal) to "when we flew home," and "during which time" to "when." If it really was "needless to say," she didn't need to say

it, and "as it happens" was just conversational filler; the piece did not lose its friendly tone without them. The stench "of" old sneakers and formaldehyde was wrong. (Although a few old sneakers might have found their way on board, formaldehyde probably hadn't.) She changed "of" to "like," creating the simile she had intended in the first place.

Here's the first rewrite. (She added the brackets around trouble spots afterward.)

Though I have many teachers and a mom who likes to lecture, in my life it's my sister, age seven, who does most of the instructing. After all, she's the only one who really knows how to make the VCR do everything it's designed to. I used to think I was a big shot when I was her age because I knew just which wire to twist to erase the fuzzy-static [that was forever drowning out] the Brady Bunch. My mom still can't tune in her favorite radio station on our Casio Supreme Stereo, and she's helpless when faced with the alien cable box. A few months ago I watched my sister try to show her which buttons to push to record a TV show. Poor Mom—the generation gap is widening in our house, byte by byte, chip by chip.

I've also learned to take other technology for granted from my sister. Last summer we flew from New York to London in only six hours, [which] didn't impress her much. She didn't understand why it took so *long*. (There's nothing more jaded than a seven-year-old.) [From my point of view], the ride was [a far cry] from spectacular; the cabin was cramped, the wallpaper and seat coverings were dizzying, the air was clogged by a stench like old sneakers and formaldehyde, the food (?) was disgusting, and [somewhere along the line] I lost five hours of my life. Where that time went I'll never understand, but at least it had the decency to come back four weeks later when we flew home. What would have happened if I kept flying east? Would I get younger and younger (and eventually understand things)?

[There are] a few [things] I haven't been too old to learn on my own, though. While my sister went to camp, I rode a bicycle across Canada, 750 miles in 28 days, when it rained for two weeks straight. I learned to appreciate the sun, but I also learned to enjoy the rain. My journey was slow, yes. But it was refreshing ([there is] a small brook in Algonquin Park with water so cold it could chill a penguin) informative (an old man in Whitney Ontario [will tell you] more about trout fishing than [you'll ever want to know]), and far more beautiful (from the soft evergreens lining Fodder Pond to the hard cobblestone streets in Old Quebec) than any voyage through darkness in an oblong metal box [could ever hope to be.]

I am no naturalist; I don't eat bark. I like junk food as much as the next person, and I am the first to run to the video shop when my family wants a movie for that VCR. But I have discovered [along the way] that one [thing] does not have to exclude the other. I can only teach people what I have already learned. And I would take pride in showing someone (maybe even my sister when she's old enough) first hand that popcorn tastes just as good while you're watching a sunset from a mountaintop as it does while you're watching an old movie.

At this point, the lead still wasn't right, and she didn't have the solution to the problem of the end. She decided now was a good time to put it away for a while.

Two days later, looking at it fresh, she rewrote the lead and the last paragraph where most of the trouble was, three more times, grinding slowly to get the ideas right. The end had to tie it all together, and it didn't yet.

She didn't really like the assignment very much, and she wanted the ending to reflect the honest humility she felt about it. In the beginning she had tried, in a light way, to say that she didn't like to teach. She liked learning from example, and from doing things. So she decided to change

"take pride in showing someone," because it sounded so teachy. It took most of a Saturday afternoon to finish.

I think my classmates might learn more from my sister. She's seven. I'm not much of a teacher, and neither is my mom, though like a lot of moms she likes to lecture. But around here my sister, who doesn't even know how to lecture, does most of the instructing. After all, she's the only one who really can make the VCR do everything it's designed to. I used to think I was a big shot when I was her age because I knew just which wire to twist to erase the static drowning out *The Brady Bunch*. Mom is even worse than I am—she still can't tune in her favorite radio station on our Casio Supreme, and she's helpless when faced with the alien cable box, never mind the VCR. A few months ago I watched my sister try to show her which buttons to push to record a TV show. Poor Mom—the generation gap is widening in our house, byte by byte, chip by chip.

My sister has also taught me how to take other inventions in stride. Last summer we flew from New York to London in only six hours. My sister wasn't impressed. She didn't understand why it took so long. (There's nothing more jaded than a seven-year-old.) I tried to be blasé too, but it wasn't easy. The cabin was cramped, the wallpaper and seat coverings were dizzying, the air was clogged by a stench like old sneakers and formaldehyde, the food was disgusting, and I lost five hours of my life. Where that time went I'll never understand, but at least it had the decency to come back four weeks later when we flew home. What would have happened if I kept flying east? Would I get younger and younger (and eventually be seven and finally Understand Things)?

There are a few lessons I haven't been too old to learn on my own, though. While my sister went to camp that same summer, I rode a bicycle across Canada with ten other people, 750 miles in twenty-eight

days. It rained for two weeks straight. Needless to say, I learned to appreciate the sun. I also learned to enjoy the rain. My journey was slow but refreshing (a small brook in Algonquin Park runs so cold it could chill a penguin), informative (an old man in Whitney, Ontario, told me more about trout fishing than I can remember), and far more beautiful (from the soft evergreens lining Fodder Pond to the hard cobblestone streets in Old Quebec) than any high speed voyage through darkness in an oblong metal box.

But I'm no bark-munching naturalist. In fact, I eat as much popcorn as the next person, who happens to be my sister, the popcorn queen. And I'm always feeding that same VCR an old movie to have with my popcorn. I live in both these worlds, my sister's up-to-the-minute New York and the slower satisfactions of bike trips through the country. I don't know if anyone could learn something from that combination, though it's pretty important to me. But someone—maybe even my sister, when she's no longer young enough to know everything—might find out from me first hand that popcorn tastes just as good while you're watching a sunset from a mountaintop as it does while you're watching *Gone With the Wind*. Maybe even better.

It's impossible to show every change, every rejected phrase—that would require another whole book—but I hope you get an idea of the distance an essay must travel before it's ready to make the final trip to the admissions office.

Next I want to suggest a few ways to stretch one essay idea across many of the sometimes bizarre questions colleges ask.