



Lessons from a Winning Ivy League Essay on Costco

by [j9robinson](#) | Apr 2, 2016

Read Brittany Stinson's College Application Essay That Landed Her in Four Ivies—plus Stanford!

I can't resist the news stories that break this time of year announcing students who get into multiple ivy league colleges.

What I find interesting is that these articles tout the student's college application essay as the reason they got them into these insanely competitive schools.

It's never that simple.

Yes, an outstanding college application essay can give a student an edge in their admissions chances—especially at the prestige colleges.

But to even be considered, applicants must first display off-the-charts grades, test scores, extracurriculars, the whole ultimate student package.

I believe the essay comes into play when a school ends up with a pile of dream applicants who all start to look alike.

So how do they pick?

That's why it's fun to get a peek at a so-called Ivy League essay, such as the one written by Brittany Stinson. She got into five ivies and Stanford (which has a lower acceptance rate than the ivies) this month, according to [an article in Business Insider](#).

How did Brittany's essay set her apart?

Did she craft some brainy, intellectual tome about current-day politics or world thought?

Or was it a heady analytical piece on climate change or quantum physics?

No. Not even close.

She wrote her "Ivy League Essay" about Costco. And hot dogs.

I believe Brittany's essay was effective because she followed many of the narrative-writing tips and advice I give my students on how to write effective essays.

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UPDATE: I just learned that Brittany did actually use Essay Hell to help learn how to craft her now-famous essay. Here's the comment she left after I shared this post:

Brittany Stinson

[April 2, 2016 at 3:10 pm](#) "Hi! This is Brittany! The girl who wrote the essay above. Funnily enough, I actually used this website to help guide a lot of my application essays, including this one. So I guess this would be the perfect opportunity to say thank you! I feel like my essays definitely strengthened my entire application." How sweet is that? So keep reading and learn how she did it!

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Above all, Brittany used a narrative (storytelling) format in her essay, and engaged her reader at the start by using the writing technique called [an anecdote](#).

In her anecdote, she recounted her real-life moments and experiences using a fiction-writing style so you could see her in action ([Show instead of Tell](#)).

She also [took a risk on her topic](#).

Instead of trying to impress her readers, she wrote about something [“mundane”](#) or every day.

The Topic of Brittany’s Ivy League Essay

What’s more ordinary than Costco and hot dogs?

Brittany used Costco as a metaphor to the larger world, which is a classic writing device.

With that everyday topic, she was able to maintain a light, conversational style and playful language that allowed her teenage voice and sense of humor to shine through.

You almost couldn’t help but [like her](#)—a big factor in an effective essay.

Brittany also gave her essay a *strong focus* by highlighting one of her [defining qualities](#): her curiosity. (As opposed to trying to cover too much about herself.)

She [dubbed](#) herself an explorer, and escorted us through her childhood experiences at Costco that sparked her wonder and curiosity.

She then brought us up to her high school years and showed us how that sense of wonder shifted into more weighty areas, such as school and her other passions.

Perfect!

My point with sharing Brittany’s essay is not to hold it out as the exact essay that can get you into an ivy league school. (In fact, like all of these college application essays, it has its flaws and weaknesses.)

Instead, I want you to see that you can also write an equally engaging and meaningful essay using the same approach.

Start by finding one of your defining qualities or characteristics that you can showcase in your essay.

Then think of a moment or experience to start your essay (using an anecdote) that will grab the reader at the start.

Trust that a mundane or everyday topic will work beautifully, and let go of trying to be impressive.

Work in details about your life and interests. Be specific.

See what Brittany wove into her essay about herself in this single sentence:

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.

No one can promise that your essay will get you into a prestige school.

But what a good one can do is help your target colleges get a clear picture of who you are, what sets you apart from other students and how you would fit into their school.

Where you end up will depend on the complete package you present your schools, and a lot of other highly subjective factors as well.

So don’t fret about your essay, or write one exactly like Brittany’s or try to game the decision-making process.

The best thing you can do is [find a topic](#) that is original and true to you, and learn some narrative writing techniques to help you tell your story and explain what it means to you.

Here's Brittany's Ivy League essay that she submitted to the Common Application (from [Business Insider](#)):

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.