

LESSON 5

Example of Personal Essay for Common Application



FULFILLMENT *Fundamentals*

This essay shows how the challenges the student faced in caring for her autistic sister resulted in an unexpected path forward in her education.

Prompt: The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

I never had a choice.

My baby sister was born severely autistic, which meant that every detail of our home life was repeatedly adjusted to manage her condition. I couldn't go to bed without fearing that Mindy would wake up screaming with that hoarse little voice of hers. I couldn't have friends over on weekends because we never knew if our entire family would need to shift into crisis mode to help Mindy regain control.

We couldn't take a family vacation because Mindy would start hitting us during a long car ride when she didn't want to sit there anymore. We couldn't even celebrate Christmas like a normal family because Mindy would shriek and run away when we tried to give her presents.

I was five years old when Mindy was born. For the first ten years, I did everything I could to help my mom with Mindy. But Mom was depressed and would often stare out the window, as if transfixed by the view. Dad was no help either. He used his job as an excuse to be away from home. So, I tried to make up for both of them and rescue Mindy, however I could whenever she needed it.

However, one day, when I was slowly driving Mindy around with the windows down, trying to lull her into a calmer state, we passed two of my former classmates from middle school. They heard Mindy growling her disapproval as the ride was getting long for her. One of them turned to the other and announced, "Oh my God! Marabeth brought her pet monster out for a drive!" They laughed hysterically and ran down the street.

After that day, I defied my parents at every turn. I also ignored Mindy. I even stopped doing homework. I purposely "got in with the wrong crowd" and did whatever they did.

My high school counselor Ms. Martinez saw through it all. She knew my family's situation well. It didn't take her long to guess what had probably happened.

"Marabeth, I get it. My brother has Down syndrome. It was really hard growing up with him as a brother. The other kids were pretty mean about it, especially in high school."

I doubted she understood. "Yeah. So?"

"I'm guessing something happened that hurt or embarrassed you."

"Maybe."

"I'm so sorry. I can only imagine how you must have felt."

It must have been the way she said it because I suddenly found myself sobbing into my trembling, cupped hands.

Ms. Martinez and I met every Friday after that for the rest of the year. Her stories of how she struggled to embrace living with and loving her brother created a bridge to my pain and then my healing. She explained that her challenges led her to pursue a degree in counseling so that she could offer other people what no one had given her.

I thought that Mindy was the end of my life, but, because of Ms. Martinez's example and kindness, I can now see that Mindy is a gift, pointing me toward my future.

Now, I'm applying to study psychology so that I can go on to earn my master's degree in counseling. I'm learning to forgive my parents for their mistakes, and I'm back in Mindy's life again, but this time as a sister, not a savior. My choice.

Word Count: 553