



WESTERN RESERVE ACADEMY

COLLEGE ESSAYS 2025

Introduction

The College Counseling Office is very excited and proud to share with you our annual College Essay Collection. For the 13th year, we engaged our seniors in a blind essay competition, and the essays contained here include our three top place winners. The essays that follow are powerful, raw, and authentic and contain strong language that some may find troubling. However, we felt it was important to share our student's voices as they were intended.

Though these few essays were deemed to be the best submissions of the 36 entries into the competition, it is worth sharing that these topics and these qualities are commonplace in the work of our students here at WRA. We feel amazingly fortunate to work with such talented and multifaceted students. I hope you will feel their energy and enjoy their stories.

I would be remiss not to thank my fellow committee members who evaluated the submissions: Science Department Chair Hannah Barry '10, Fine & Performing Arts Department faculty member Martha Bayliss '88, Instructional Librarian Cole Campbell '08, Associate Director of College Counseling Anna Hutchins, English Department faculty member Sasha Maseelall '96, Social Science Department Chair Dr. Lisabeth Robinson and Associate Director of Admission Lakisha Wingard.

Enjoy the essays!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MPN', written in a cursive, flowing style.

Margeaux Nething
Associate Director of College Counseling & Testing Coordinator



Addie Lewis '25 | First Place

I am a collector. I've only come to realize the extent of this fact in recent months, but I have been collecting for as long as I can remember.

It started with small objects when I moved into my new bedroom on Laurel Avenue. As I stood for the first time in the doorway, old wood floors creaking under my feet, I noticed something about the room aside from the hideous chocolate-brown walls: the baseboard trim was extended about four feet up the walls, creating a three-inch wide ledge around the perimeter of the room, right at my kindergarten eye-level. Soon enough, every square inch of that small ledge was lined with my Schleich animals, Littlest Pet Shops, souvenirs my dad brought back from work trips, hair ribbons, stickers from my friends, and any stuffed animals that were small enough to fit. My mom said it

made my room look junky. I felt like a museum curator surrounded by my tiny, mismatched exhibits portraying a short history of me.

In middle school, I began to collect stories. I flew through books like wildfire, each one more magical than the last, each making me hungrier for more. It was the age of mean girls and social anxiety, and I wanted nothing more than to immerse myself in every myth and fable beyond this world. These stories entertained me and taught me life lessons I still remember today. The sight of my books organized meticulously on my shelf brought me peace.

When the pandemic hit, I became a collector of art. I filled pages and pages of sketchbooks. Amassed an unreasonable amount of art supplies. Created an Instagram account to share my tiny exhibits with the world. Alone, many of the pieces weren't impressive, but together they told a story of progress and a girl transfixed with the mysteries of lines and color.

In high school, I became a collector of facts. I discovered a new love for historical inquiry, especially involving the untold stories of women and other marginalized groups throughout time. Research projects were my jam. I found it deeply satisfying to weed through historical documents for the perfect snippets of information, like a detective drawing red strings across her evidence board. While still interested in fictional stories, I gained a new appreciation for true stories and how they shaped the world I was only beginning to understand.

Like every kid and teenager, I yearned to be someone special, someone interesting, someone noteworthy. Some months ago when I returned home from boarding school for the summer, I threw my last bags down on the floor of my bedroom and paused. Breathing in the scents of freshly laundered sheets and humid summer air, I peered around my room with fresh eyes. I observed the stacks of blankets on my bed sprinkled with cat hair, and the afternoon light projecting dancing rainbows onto my old stuffed animals. I turned to my desk covered in paint smudges, dozens of markers and pens in my organizers beckoning me to use them again. I turned to my bookshelf full of my most beloved and worn books, the envelope for a history contest award placed on top. Lastly, I looked around at that small white ledge, now lined with paintings, drawings, pictures of friends, and countless trinkets saturated with invaluable memories.

I wanted to be special like the characters in my books. I wanted fights with dragons, cunning heists, and adventures in space. But standing in my room that day, surveying my little ecosystem of collections, I realized that I had always been special. My collections told a story of me, one that no one else could tell. Sure, many others were interested in history, or art, or reading, but I alone had carefully curated aspects of those topics into a mental and physical manifestation of the most interesting and noteworthy thing of all: me.



Xochi Nandi '25 | Second Place

I'm home-less. I'm from nowhere and everywhere at once. My whole life, I've been lying about where I'm from because when people ask me that question, I can't give them an honest answer. I learned early on that most people ask where you're from just to be polite, so I pick a place—any place—and move on. My story isn't tied to one location. I've spent years navigating new cultures from India to California, El Salvador, and Ohio.

My Dad grew up in India, and my Mom is American, yet they call me Xochi, an ancient Aztec word that means “princess of flowers.” I was born in India, and from a young age, my dad taught me Hindi. I loved the spices of Indian food and dressing up in bindis and saris. I never left the house without a bindi on my forehead. That tiny bindi made me feel connected to my roots, a quiet but essential part of who I was, no matter where I went.

I struggled in elementary school in San Jose, California; it was nothing like India. The aloo gobi and parathas I'd eat daily slowly turned into mac-and-cheese and pizza. I ditched my bindi because people kept asking why a dot was on my forehead. My Hindi vocabulary slipped away from me, and though I was too young to realize it, I was losing my culture.

Then, we moved to El Salvador, where I enrolled in a local school. There, I was the only girl who didn't know Spanish, the one they said must be adopted because I didn't look like my parents. But instead of retreating, I threw myself into learning Spanish, and by the end of three years, I was fluent, making friends in a language that had once felt so foreign. Later, I used my Spanish to help a girl from Spain at summer camp who couldn't speak English. I realized that language bridges divides, forging deep and lasting connections.

When we moved back to India, it felt different, or maybe I was different. I had lost my native tongue, and my pale skin made me stand out. I felt like a tourist in my homeland, clinging to my last name like it was the only thread connecting me to a place that no longer felt like mine. I found new ways to belong by volunteering with kids from some of the poorest neighborhoods and teaching English to kids eager to learn. Sometimes, home isn't where you've been—it's where you can make a difference.

At 14, I moved to Ohio by myself. The COVID-19 crisis became so deadly in India that my best option was to move to the USA, even if it meant going to boarding school and never living with my parents again. Instead of letting the fear of being alone consume me, I built connections. My parents moved across three countries during high school, but I stayed in Ohio, creating my own life. I joined my first sports team and soon became a varsity athlete. I signed up for clubs, eventually led initiatives like the mock trial, and boldly decided to run for class officer. I realized I had been preparing for this moment my whole life—adapting, building communities, and finding ways to thrive, no matter where I was.

When people ask where I'm from, they expect a pinpoint on a map, but my story is far more complex. My identity is woven through the countless people I've met while living in constant motion. Throughout my journey, I've found strength in being unanchored. I've realized that home isn't a place; it's the people you love, the ones who teach you resilience, empathy, and the art of starting over. My life has been a series of adaptations, each shaping me into a person who is comfortable with change and confident in my ability to thrive no matter where I am.



Marie Gentile '25 | Third Place

As I drag my black ink pen across the bright white paper, I hit a bump in the table, leaving a dent in my otherwise perfectly-straight line. There are no mistakes, I remind myself, as I transform the half-circle into the center of a flower with vines sprouting from either side.

Zentangle is a meditative method of drawing a single shape filled with designs. Every completed piece consists of a complex structure of small patterns that coalesce as I go, so that the art I have been making for the last six years comes from inspired decisions and happy accidents.

The tangles in my mind weren't always so calming. When I was five years old, my teacher assigned us short books to take home. Reading was supposed to be fun, but words complicated themselves as they jumped between lines and switched places in sentences. Over the years, I worked hard to untangle letter sequences, and my dyslexia diagnosis in ninth grade finally gave a name to my struggle. By then, I had discovered my unique brain was actually a strength. Ever since elementary school, if I couldn't fall asleep, I created equations in my head to try to solve them. Numbers and shapes knit together in such beautiful patterns I could visualize; how could I not fall in love with math? Now, in calculus, I can easily rotate an equation along the x or y axis to find the volume of a shape, or layer triangles and squares in the z-plane to form a 3D object.

My first year of high school, I discovered the perfect extracurricular to combine my love of art and math: technical theater. I applied geometry and algebra to meticulously construct eye-catching sets while also pursuing stage management. I loved untangling the unexpected in live performances, even as I built the scenery to exact dimensions. During one dance show, the color-changing curtain (cyclorama) came unplugged in the middle of a song, so I rushed over. I happened to plug it back in at the exact moment as a beat drop in the song. Afterwards, I got compliments on such a cool effect from audience members who didn't know what really happened. No matter how much practice and proactiveness goes into a show, nothing ever goes exactly as planned. Imperfection often creates more impactful art.

Even when I have a clear vision of a final project, I find meaning in the tangles that got me there. Last spring, for my Eagle Scouts project, I installed pavers in an octagon pattern in the center of a courtyard and built a bench. This required foresight and a clear and measured design with no deviations. But being one of only a handful of girls in my Boy Scouts troop hasn't been free of complications. National has many strict policies that make it difficult for us to do outings together, and sometimes, the boys feel like the girls are infiltrating their program. However, the blurred gender lines are worth it because young boys get to see me – a senior patrol leader and a female – as a role model and an authority figure.

To draw a zentangle is not only to admire its final product, but to recognize patterns and learn patience. Dyslexia is not a setback, but a discovery that numbers and pictures inlay themselves to form complex yet graceful solutions and images. Technical theater is not just about correcting blocking and moving sets, but undoing little knots as I watch actors perform – knots that pull us all together into a crew of forever inseparable friends. Scouting is not about achieving the cherished rank of Eagle Scout but rather learning how to be a leader and knowing which tangles I should address, ignore, or create. When I hit a bump in the table, I remember it is all part of the plan to make the final product even greater.



Izzy Haslinger Johnson '25 | Honorable Mention

The Character of Me

The rainy season's humidity permeates the walls of a hilltop classroom in a serene corner of Taipei, Taiwan. I watch intently as my teacher's hands glide along a piece of perfectly square, red calligraphy paper. Individual strokes merge into a singular character faster than my eyes can keep their focus. With just one line out of place, its entire meaning would be lost.

"Wo," pronounced with a falling-rising tone in Mandarin, consists of seven flowing strokes, uniting to express "I" or "me." The events of my life, like the many strokes and lines comprising a complex character, have shaped my curiosity and eagerness to learn.

Likewise, my interests have taken me across the world, from a Mandarin language immersion program in Taiwan to a cancer research internship in Germany. Explorations of diverse perspectives broaden my personal and cultural understandings, with each new experience adding a stroke to my character.

I once found comfort in the familiarity of romance languages: Sunday morning Spanish classes with my mother blurred into bits and pieces of French spoken around a dinner table. My voice formed the syllables with ease, no tongue twisting necessary.

Yet, I still wasn't fulfilled. I revered Chinese characters like works of art: admiring, but never fully understanding what lay underneath the surface.

My first high school Mandarin class changed my mind. Intimidated by the multitudes of new words I was tasked with recognizing, I learned to analyze each stroke as part of a larger picture. The character that bewilders an unfamiliar eye tells an intricate story, and each stroke adds a chapter to that story.

"Heng," a fundamental horizontal stroke, bridges two distinct sides of the character "wo" together. I found my "heng" in scientific research.

Since the very first stroke in the character of me, I have bridged intellectual and creative pursuits through research. From pondering the complexities of the Milky Way through my backyard telescope to studying the intricate activations of neural pathways in college classrooms, I take every opportunity to inquire meaningfully into my ever-evolving interests. Standing in a chilly laboratory inside my high school, I examine the MyC-CaP prostate cancer cells that I have been culturing for the past year to conduct a vaccine trial on lab mice.

In many cases, the distinct meaning of a Chinese character lies within the context of its surrounding sentence. Despite being riddled with tricky homophones and minor tonal shifts, the meaning can always be discerned by an experienced listener.

Typing away at a new article, I blend science and storytelling through my outreach program, Diverse Discoveries, where I aim to increase the accessibility of scientific exploration. As I hold Q&A sessions, create inclusive discussion spaces, and connect students with professionals, my voice intertwines with those of some of the country's most accomplished scientists to open new doors into the scientific world. As my lexicon grows, my fluency increases, and I leverage my passions to communicate with others.

As I navigate the details of lab environments, studying new experiments and mapping the placement of every machine and

every tool in my head, it's similar to learning a new language; my voice finds comfort in the pronunciations that once felt foreign just as my hands fall into the rhythm of a new experiment. I find my place in the lab that will become my second home. The language of science once seemed foreign to me, but as I follow the twists and turns of experiments, a trip to a conference, or a hectic lab meeting, I piece together meanings to tell my story.

The sun sets as the sound of evening raindrops intensifies against my window. I begin writing an essay in Mandarin, diligently filling in each square of a pristine sheet of manuscript paper. My pen travels quickly, each stroke of my identity falling into place.



Raven Wang '25 | Honorable Mention

Dear Dad,

We come from a military family, but lately, I've been breaking ranks.

I can still hear you and Grandpa talking, swapping stories about the good old days when Grandpa was an army medic, stitching soldiers up with more grit than supplies. And he talked about his father, too, and how at the tender age of not-even-an-adult, he took off to defend China from the Japanese. For you, the military wasn't just a job. It was more like the manual for how to live a life, from how to dress to how to fold a quilt. Speaking of which, remember that time in grade school when I didn't fold my quilt properly, and instead of a verbal lesson, you threw it out of the window? I learned about

respect, discipline, and the proper trajectory of airborne bedding that day. The neighbors learned something too, I imagine.

But don't get me wrong. You weren't all hard edges. You were also the compassionate dad who whipped up special batches of congee and tried to make it to my school pick-ups when work didn't get in the way. I soaked up both the strict, soldier-like discipline and the loving warmth.

In my own way, I thought I was living up to your standards when I moved to America. I went Spartan, like you'd want. I was strict with myself and clear about the rules. Then, when I enrolled at Western Reserve Academy, we both admired their no-nonsense, old-school approach complete with blazers, ties, the works. A perfect blend of your values and mine, I thought. And I've done well here, but something's been shifting.

Last year, as a Prefect, I met Daniel. He was one of those kids you can't help but like. But he found himself in deep trouble, accused of plagiarism for quoting a bunch of texts without citing them. I knew I had to help him. I saw a kid overwhelmed and anxious. We worked on his paper, added the citations, and got him through with a slap on the wrist.

And you? You hated it.

"Raven, that kid's a cheater," you said. "He should've been expelled, and you, a Prefect, shouldn't be messing around with someone like him."

I get where you're coming from. In the military, there's no room for dishonesty. It's the ultimate crime. But I couldn't abandon Daniel. He wasn't a hardened criminal, just a scared kid. You taught me to be loving too, remember? I chose that path instead of the all-discipline-no-mercy one this time. Isn't protecting someone who's trying to do better part of what soldiers do too?

Since then, I've felt the gap between us growing. You've bristled at every sign that I'm not sticking to the family script. Case in point, you flat-out refused to let me go bungee jumping because it clashed with your view of 'appropriate behavior.'

But I've been leaning into something else lately. I'm embracing empathy, flexibility, and yes, a little fun. At Reserve, I've noticed how sports recruits get treated like officers, while the rest of us are more like the enlisted folks. There's a pecking order. But those same athletes wanted people to capture their games on camera, so I founded the Reserve Photo Network. Now I've got lacrosse players and art kids hanging out, trading stories, sipping Dr. Peppers together, and enjoying the absurdity of it all. Hierarchy? Melting away. You might not approve, though. You'd probably say rank has its place.

Still, despite our differing outlooks, my journey to becoming the man I am today wouldn't have been possible without your love and example. I hope you can see that, while I might not be following the path you expected, I'm still carrying the values you gave me. And maybe, in your own way, you'll find pride in that too.

P.S.

I'm going bungee jumping tomorrow. Mom said yes.

Love,
Raven