

Sample Personal Statements

Just Keep Folding—Jodie

Having explored the myths from ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, my curiosity was piqued in eighth grade by a simple legend from Japanese lore. If you fold one thousand paper cranes, the gods will grant you one wish. I took it as a challenge. My previous forays into origami had ended poorly, but I was so excited to begin my quest that this detail seemed inconsequential. My art teacher loaned me a piece of origami paper and, armed with an online tutorial, my quest began. Like an early prototype of the airplane, I ascended towards my dreams for a glorious moment before nose-diving into the ground. The first crane was a disastrous failure of wrinkly lines and torn paper. Too embarrassed to ask for another, I turned to my stack of Post-it notes. By the third attempt, I ended up with a sticky pink paper crane. Holding that delicate bird, I was flooded with triumph and elation.

The first two hundred cranes were all crafted from Post-it notes. Armed with a pack of highlighters, I decorated each piece of paper individually. I folded cranes at home, between classes, and in the car. My fingers were permanently sticky from the glue I scraped off every square. Slowly, my collection grew: first ten, then fifty, then one hundred. Before the task could become monotonous, I started experimenting. How small was it possible for a crane to be? Smaller than a golf ball? Smaller than a dime? Small enough to sit on the end of a pencil? Any size was attainable. I could make a crane smaller than almost any arbitrary form of measurement. Soon I could finish a crane in fifty seconds or with my eyes closed. Anything square and foldable became my medium. Paper towels, candy wrappers, and aluminum foil joined my vibrant menagerie of carefully folded paper. I was unstoppable; that wish was as good as mine.

By six hundred cranes, the increasing demands of high school academics caused my pace to slow. I despaired. I wouldn't let this be another ambitious project that I couldn't finish.

My cranes mattered to me. As an outlet for expression, they served as a way to defuse frustration and sadness, and a source of pride and joy. Their creation allows me to bring beauty to the world and to find a sense of order in the bustle and chaos of life. There is a lot of beauty to be found in tiny things. I'm reminded that little gestures have a lot of meaning. I have given away cranes to my friends as a pick-me-up on bad days, and I have made cranes to commemorate people, such as the dark green crane I made the day my grandmother died. They are a symbol of hope to remind me what I have accomplished.

So, I pushed myself to keep working and to keep folding one crane at a time. My determination paid off, and in the summer after sophomore year, my passion was reinvigorated. One month before the end of junior year, I folded my thousandth paper crane. As I leaned over the open drawer brimming with origami pieces in a multitude of sizes and colors, I felt a rush of satisfaction and triumph. Not only was 1,000 cranes an achievement in its own right, but I proved to myself that I can finish what I start.

The world is filled with big numbers. College tuition, monthly rent, and car prices deal in the many thousands. Those figures are incomprehensible to someone who has never interacted with anything so large, and I wanted to understand them. A thousand will never simply be a number to me: it is hundreds upon hundreds of hand-folded cranes combined with years of effort.

So what did I wish for? It turns out, I didn't need the wish. I learned I have the power to make things happen for myself.

Growing Strawberries in a High School Locker—Seena

One day this year, as I was walking by my perpetually empty locker, I was struck by an idea. I cannot identify what sparked its conception, but as my idea started to grow, thinking of possible solutions and analyzing and assessing feasibility issues began to consume me. My father calls this a "designer's high," and it was very familiar to me. I've experienced it often while collaborating with my robotics team, and in the hours I've spent with my father on design concepts for his prefabricated homes. Still, nothing I had worked on before was similar to the feeling this "out of the box" idea had triggered.

Growing strawberries in a high school locker seemed fairly simple at first. Despite knowing that this is not the typical habitat for strawberry plants, I knew from my green-thumbed mother that strawberries are among the easiest fruits to grow. Many students and teachers became interested in my project, yet were skeptical of my botanical prowess and quick to conclude that a plant could not possibly receive its basic necessities in a locker, which didn't have proper ventilation, was hot and humid, and was shielded from both sunlight and any source of water. Still, I was determined to make this work. The unfriendly habitat and logistical obstacles did not deter me.

My horticultural roots stem from my mother and elementary level biology. It wasn't until this year that my knowledge expanded beyond this casual level into a realm where biology, chemistry, and physics found beautiful, synergistic intersections. I was determined to apply what I had learned and got to work.

Due to the lack of electricity and direct sunlight, I decided to use a solar panel paired with a light sensor on the outside of my locker to power a strong, blue LED light, which is best for photosynthesis and plant growth. A friend taught

me how to solder and helped me create the solar panel setup, which turns on the blue light only when it is dark outside so the plants experience the proper light cycles. I also set up a system to slowly water the plants automatically. This involved a series of drip bottles—which another friend had for his old, now deceased, pet guinea pig—arranged to drip into each other and then onto the soil.

Having addressed the issues of light and water, I focused on the need to circulate air. Leaving the door closed would provide essentially no circulation and would create a hot and moist environment, making the plants more susceptible to mold. After experimenting with various designs and a 3D printed prototype, I came up with an extension of the latching mechanism on the inside of my locker, which I called the “strawberry jamb.” The jamb, which I cut using our school’s CNC router, sufficiently boosts airflow by allowing the door to remain ajar about two inches while still maintaining the integrity of the existing locking mechanism. I made a beautiful wooden box, emblazoned with the laser-cut engraving “Strawberry Fields Forever” and provided proper drainage onto a tray inside the locker to avoid water damage to school property. The strawberry plants are now growing in my partially open locker providing a topic of conversation and much commentary from students walking by.

What began as a seemingly improbable idea fed my passion for creative thinking and mechanical engineering. This project not only allowed me to practically apply isolated academic principles I had studied, but it also pushed me to traverse multiple disciplines to creatively solve problems. Furthermore, it’s uniqueness beckoned for community input and collaboration, allowing me to access resources to achieve fiscally responsible solutions and ultimate success. For me, it was invigorating to propel a project that many deemed impossible into the realm of possible. I intend to continue to explore and invent because only then are new realities possible.

Spy—Elana

Ten years ago, I was a spy.

Secret identities, awesome spy gadgets and undercover operations consumed my imagination. This was serious business and I took training seriously.

My brother was Public Enemy No.1. He’d come home and I’d use Mission Impossible stealth moves to follow him everywhere. I’d pick his bedroom door with a nail file and steal his allowance. I’d climb the tree outside his window and take reconnaissance photos.

The proudest moment of my young espionage career was Operation Secret Crate. One Saturday afternoon, Mom drove up with my brother and his friends, who were coming over to play Grand Theft Auto, make stupid jokes and eat junk food.

My mission: eavesdrop.

My high-tech tool was a plastic moving crate, two and a half feet square, forgotten behind the living room couch. It had eye-holes big enough for an intrepid spy.

I was small and flexible, but fitting inside that crate was a stretch. Still, the mission was on. Quick jumping jacks and toe touches to loosen the limbs. Squat, knees to chest, crate over head...

Slam! The boys banged through the front door and swarmed onto the couch. Peering out I saw tennis shoes and hairy ankles. My heart thumped so loud I worried it would overpower their excited voices and the hum of the X-Box. The smell of Pizza Hut cheese sticks was in the air.

The moment of truth. Would they notice the girl crouched in the crate inches away?

One minute. Five minutes. Ten minutes. They didn’t notice! Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. Still safe. Thirty minutes. I realized the flaw in my plan. I might learn their secrets, but my body was so contorted and aching that soon I might never walk again.

Something had to be done. Something bold, drastic, unthinkable.

ARGGHHAHGHGHGHGHGHGHHAHDHGHGHGHGHG!!!!!!

I shouted at the top of my lungs, flung the crate off me and jumped onto the couch. They all screamed. The cheese sticks went flying. The coke spilled. My brother, for once, had nothing to say.

Elana, girl of mystery, strikes, I said. Be warned.

I strutted out of the living room.

Since those first spy trainings, I’ve never stopped preparing for a future clandestine career. I’ve cracked codes in computer science and cracked jokes with a CIA operative. I’ve slogged through 10k of mud at the Camp Pendleton mud run and four years of Chinese in high school. I’ve flown planes with the Civil Air Patrol in Santa Monica and beat drums with Sudanese refugees in Tel-Aviv. I have launched a rocket, administered CPR, operated ham radios, set a broken arm and helped a rescue team look for a downed plane.

I could end up as a spy, a diplomat, a soldier, an astronaut, or a fighter for a lost cause. I could end up famous or completely unknown. I know two things for sure: I won’t be at a desk job, and I’ll be good to have around when there’s trouble.