

10 Successful Harvard Essays 2026

Samantha's Essay



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An exceptional pain struck my right shoulder just hours after a routine track practice. I reported the symptoms to my father who promptly administered Tylenol. While adjusting myself restlessly on our living room sofa, the sharp sensation rapidly spread across my body. For a fleeting moment, all my muscles tightened and trapped me in utter agony. Then, ninety seconds passed and a release overwhelmed me. I was completely paralyzed.

At twelve, I suffered a rare spinal cord stroke which left me entirely immobile and unfeeling yet still cognitively intact. While lying in the coffin-like chamber of a five-hour MRI, I vividly recall evaluating my future. In the natural order of adolescent priority, I wondered if I would return home in time for school the next morning. Frantic doctors strung my unmoving limbs through countless inconclusive examinations: a spinal tap, angiogram, CT scan, and three MRIs would diagnose me with a stroke a neurologist claimed he had never encountered and hoped to never encounter again.

Baffled doctors revealed to my parents that I would be forever paralyzed, unable to breathe on my own. They recommended the immediate and permanent attachment of a ventilator. In a defiant, desperate attempt to save my life, I was transferred to a Boston hospital. Throughout the course of the transfer, I contracted pneumonia, sepsis, and eventually septic shock. My deteriorating conditions rendered my survival nothing short of miraculous.

My hunger was satisfied by the dispensing of a glucose and water concoction through feeding tubes. Excruciating sensations pierced my shoulder, ironically indicating the onset of recovery. Recovery would be accompanied by discouraging setbacks, mental torment, and a major dependency on nurses. Regardless of the circumstances, I chose to maintain a positive outlook.

I was graciously blanketed with optimism from my community. I began inpatient rehabilitation after eleven days in intensive care. I ritualistically engaged in physical, occupational, and speech therapies for a near fifty days of rehab. Despite medical odds, I reclaimed the ability to breathe, eat, and talk without assistance.

I escaped the confines of my hospital bed and eventually the limits of a wheelchair. At the end of my inpatient stay at Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, I limped beyond the entrance with a walker. Even with substantial weakness on my right side requiring years of outpatient therapy, I relished my triumph.

My residual deficits include minor sensation weakness on my right side and the inability to move my right hand. The remaining physical damage from my stroke is nonetheless incomparable to the fortune and privilege I have obtained. I have been gifted insight into the strength of humanity. Particularly, I have witnessed raw, uncensored battles between life-threatening illness and innocent children; I have witnessed courage in its truest form. After my battle, I feel wholeheartedly responsible to use my recovered being as a vessel to serve the families on the pediatric floors of my hospitals. I published a memoir recounting the stages of my stroke and have donated the proceeds. I have worked tirelessly to transform societal discomfort with disabilities through writing and public speaking. Ultimately, I have overcome.

I am unfamiliar with the young athlete who I was before my injury, yet I yearn for a chance to talk to her. Upon greeting her, I would extend a lifeless hand. Sensitive to how little time she has with her health, I would speak unhesitatingly. I would prepare her briefly, gently, withholding the impending pain and uncertainty.

Then, after reveling in her potential, I'd demand she sprint away from me.

I would watch as she hurries from our conversation. Although her fear may leave her breathless, she does not suffocate; she will conquer great strides in denser air. She will clear tremendous hurdles and fill bleachers with spectators who will cherish her victories. She is young and unknowing now, but I am the living proof that she will find her way from me.

Professional Review by College Choice Counseling

At first glance, admissions officers might think this essay is another personal statement centered on the often-overused topic of overcoming a sports injury, "I suffered, and I recovered." However, this is not the case with Samantha's essay.

Samantha deftly writes how suffering a stroke caused her to reflect on her identity, to adapt, and to develop both empathy and responsibility. These are precisely the traits admissions officers are looking for in an applicant's personal statement. Schools want to know what an applicant will bring to their campus!

Samantha begins her essay with vivid description, tension, and authenticity that not only showcases her writing ability but also engages her reader. As the essay progresses, she does not tell us she was resilient, she shows us, she "contracted pneumonia and sepsis" and "reclaimed the ability to breathe, eat, and talk." Samantha moves away from the idea that she overcame a horrible stroke and instead describes her resulting empathy, her desire to serve and advocate for others, and her renewed sense of purpose. For example, she tells us she wants to be a vessel to serve families, she published a memoir and donated the proceeds, and she has written and spoken publicly about societal discomfort with disabilities. Finally, Samantha's metaphorical ending not only ties everything back together, but it is also a message of hope and leaves a lasting positive impression on her reader: "she will conquer great strides in denser air... will clear tremendous hurdles... fill bleachers with spectators."

By thinking deeply, communicating clearly, and reflecting, Samantha produced an essay that enables her to connect with her reader and make an impact. In fact, we want to read her memoir!



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Barbara is a Certified Educational Planner (CEP) and a professional member of the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA). Barbara holds a BGS from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and a Juris Doctorate from the University of Detroit School of Law.

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