

Dear Assessors,

Like any hormonal adolescent, I'm fueled by compulsion. Bowling one season. Cross country the next. Oh, here's a Rubik's cube! (Look, a Megaminx, too!) There's some code. Mmm—apple pie!

But rarely do I say, Oh goody, an English paper to write! That part is unfortunate.

Unfortunate because I waste time impassioned by the baubles and trinkets of life— the shiny, irresistible, and pointless. Unfortunate because I procrastinate until the last moment. Unfortunate because the only thing that will engross me in an essay, aside from passion— which inexplicably goes missing every time I attempt a literary synthesis or rhetorical analysis— is a deadline. And in high school, condensed deadlines pile up like fender-benders on a slippery slope.

If my writing is ruled by deadlines, then they act as a terrific mentor. Challenging. Encouraging, almost. They teach with the incentive of a grade, a percentage in the gradebook. And I've realized that I'm getting quite used to them, what with all the rush of high school. What was the dread of an essay due by the weekend became a motivation. Grades are a passion, and English papers come with them.

Hence the first piece that I've included: my ninth assertion journal: "The Art of Procrastination," an essay featuring my volatile relationship with deadlines. But it is also the discovery of the oft-overlooked potential in procrastination, the science in it, the *art* in it. While examining an aspect of human nature, this piece also experiments with stylistic risks and is very personal.

Despite the positive blips in this relationship, deadlines are irksome. It seems wrong to trade off a frenzied last-minute efficiency for unhealthy work habits. Thus, a different assertion journal concluded in the realization that "all I have to do is try." That effort is the beginning of success. That action is the first step. That essay-writing can be done with joy, so long as I choose to make it so.

This was once true. In elementary school there was a free-write period every day, and I eagerly wrote in luminous imagery. I was the proud author of "My Pet Turkey" and "The Best Christmas."

But in fifth grade, the novel idea of the essay confounded me. Persuasive essays vexed me in sixth grade. Purposeful expository essays were the bane of my academic life in seventh grade. Eighth grade introduced complex literary analyses in the form of essays. Ninth grade cracked and scrutinized the essay, which flowed out as an arbitrary mess. Tenth grade scrambled and cooked and denatured the essay into an unrecognizable form. This year we attempt to savor this scrambled eggssay— and foreseeably to little enjoyment.

This is paradise to the creative mind. Right-brain lobe exercises galore! But to my mind biased towards the opposite lobe— a mind trained by programming computers, by speed-solving Rubik's cubes, by competing in math competitions— this is all just unremitting travail. I was a literary recluse since the birth of the essay into my academic sphere. Procrastination and long deadlines shaped my lexical life; I wrote because I *had* to— for my classes, for my teachers, for my parents, for my grades, for my pride. The only unprompted reading I did came in the form of scrolling and skimming and misunderstanding and re-reading Wikipedia pages and coding documentation. So I did read quite a lot for school, for which my search for knowledge was insatiable— but I had lost the sense of reading and writing *for fun*.

Fortunately, for both you and me, there has been a comeback. A revival of the Classical Era of my grade-school days.

My Enlightenment began, unsurprisingly, with our study of the Enlightenment last year. We were reading *Frankenstein*, in which Victor Frankenstein's ardor for science ultimately deferred to his survival needs of Romanticism. We read *Siddhartha*, which watched the protagonist rise to the peaceful omniscience of the Buddha.

While I may never expect to achieve true enlightenment as Siddhartha Buddha had, or to possess a passion to pursue a life-long search for a singular purpose like Victor, these books began to form the Bible of my non-religious life. Religion is just a search for truth, for explanations. Essays and books are simply meant to discover this truth.

And before our minds wander anywhere too spectacular or fantastical, the truth lies in ourselves. Everything that exists in our world, our universe— perhaps even the multi-verse— lies in the

grey matter in a person's head. The imagination of human beings. So I write about human nature. That is my calling, my Enlightenment.

My first essay has already been introduced to you. It is quite clearly a reflection of my own nature and thus is the personal essay. But while the scope of that essay is limited to the procrastinators such as myself, the others encompass a greater range of human characteristics.

The next piece is a rhetorical analysis of Emerson's speech, "The Divinity School Address," the first major essay of the year. My piece, "On Teaching the Universe," is on the subject of the human response to repetition, in which I attempt to emulate Emerson's repetition and its effect. I chose this piece because I thought it would be interesting to revisit a piece from early in the year, to explore the growth I'd undergone.

The author's choice essay is a more recent piece for the "culture desk" assignment that prompted us to detail one distinctly American idea or object. I chose open-source software— collectively "opensource," I call it in my essay, "Rise of the Little Americas"— as the American facet. This piece was chosen as a medley of the previous two; there was no strict task, no strict object, and therefore no strict essay; it is something of an assertion journal, but more developed; something of an analytical paper, but more creative; something of a narrative, but more formal. And it still discusses fundamental national and human values.

Finally, the timed writing piece is written in response to Mark Slouka's article, "Dehumanized: When math and science rule the school." I argue that, contrary to Slouka's criticism of the STEM fields and his support of strictly humanities-based fields, our true capabilities are still governed by the physical world and our knowledge in technology— which are based on math and science. It grounds the imaginative world of the human in the physical world of the human, again analyzing the person's realm— this time by examining its borders.

I mentioned that I *rarely* think enthusiastically about writing essays. But these four papers were an unexpected gift to me. As Mrs. Huminski said last year to our Advanced English II class, writing essays is the excitingly enlightening process of figuring ideas out. Of finding meaning and truth. And now that I know what I have to figure out and the trivial amount of effort— relative to the grand scheme of Life—necessary to essay an essay, my perception of writing has greatly improved.

That being said, revising the former three of these pieces gave me the chills. Those chills of looking back into the past, of noticing the amateur writer I appeared to be, of realizing that I had left almost a dozen typos in just these three pieces. But they are heartwarming chills, not chilled hearts; the nostalgia of even a half-year leaves me reminiscing. I hope that you, as assessor but human being as well, will experience this too: the joy of progress, of natural mistakes, of life itself.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathan Lam". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of "Jonathan" and "Lam" being capitalized and prominent.

Jonathan Lam