

WRITING A GREAT BBYO ESSAY

The following essays and excerpts of essays are actual essays written by BBYO-ers in their college applications. These essays talk about the themes that many teens in BBYO wish to address in their own writings. They've been critiqued, in terms of content and writing ability, by three experts to help guide you as you begin writing your essays.

Matt Tzucker, founder of Make-A-Statement.Net, a college admissions essay consulting company, is the first evaluator. His comments are in red.

Robert Andrews, Associate Director of Admissions at Brandeis, is the second. His comments are in blue.

The third set of comments come from Dr. Judith Silverman Hodara, the Senior Associate Director of Wharton MBA Admissions at the University of Pennsylvania, Wharton School of Business. Her comments are in green.

Essay #1: About events that shaped the applicant

For the past four years, I have been involved in the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization. Since that time, I have participated in various leadership activities on the local, regional, and international levels. Amongst hundreds of memorable experiences, two programs stand out as having had the greatest impact on my life.

In the summer of 2003, I attended the Chapter Leadership Training Conference (CLTC). CLTC developed my ability to set goals and work to accomplish them. Upon my return home, I had the confidence to run for a chapter position and effectively fulfill my duties. I became comfortable speaking in front of a group, helping to secure my election to four chapter positions, a regional office, and an international chairmanship. Additionally, I mustered the courage to run for an international board position; an achievement shared by approximately twenty-five members a year from an organization of nearly eighteen thousand.

In July of 200X, I attended what has become the most memorable three weeks of my life, International Kallah. Kallah differed from CLTC in that leadership was not the stated goal. Kallah was about the role that Judaism plays in the participants' daily lives and the ability to develop a personal Jewish identity. At Kallah I learned to examine my positions on just about everything. I realized how much I took for granted because I had never had to evaluate my personal beliefs to such an extent. I studied holy books and texts. I asked questions. I found knowledge and I found answers. At Kallah, I found myself.

My religious and cultural identity has always been important to me. My active participation in a Jewish trans-denominational youth group, the B'nai Brith Youth Organization (BBYO), has been the chief extracurricular influence in my high school career. I've spent five years of my life completely devoted to BBYO, holding leadership positions at the local and regional levels. BBYO activities have afforded me the opportunity to travel both within the United States and, later this year, to Europe (Poland) and Israel on a program called "March of the

Living". I've made close friendships and met people from across the world that I now consider to be family. As a result of my participation I have developed confidence, self-discipline, and leadership skills. As a senior, I strive to be a positive role model for new and younger members and to give back to this organization a small measure of what it has given me.

You used your BBYO experience very well in this essay. By using "brushstrokes" to convey the important facts about the organization, you were able to devote most of your space to the skills that BBYO has given you. The theme of personal growth, which should be a part of any personal statement, is conveyed with every experience you discuss. There are a few mechanical mistakes, but overall this is a well-written, effective essay.

This is a great topic for this essay prompt. BBYO is clearly a transformative experience. My first thought about this already fine essay, is why are you packing so much into one space? Instead of writing about three different programs, CLTC, Kallah and March of the Living, why not just pick one event and describe it as an example of BBYO's influence? I also think my 9th grade English teacher had it right: "Show. Don't tell." Imagery and descriptions of events are powerful tools when used correctly. With a little more attention to style, this is the beginning of a very good essay.

I agree that you may want to hone in on one of these experiences that you have had; and it sound like Kallah was the one that had the most impact on you. The others are great but do dilute the impact of the Kallah. You have said that at Kallah you "found yourself" and I would perhaps choose another term, or define more so what that actually means for you. You are lucky in that you have had this great transformative experience, and as an admissions professional, I would look to really focus on that growth and development when reading the essay.

Essay #2: About a challenging experience

Charles Schulz once said, "Nobody remembers who came in second." Sadly this is the truth and I experienced the pain of coming in second place in an election for a position that I thought would define me during my junior and senior years in high school.

At my youth groups annual regional convention ([blank] region of B'nai B'rith Youth Organization) I ran for the position of regional Moreh (regional recruitment and retention chairman). It is a great honor to serve on this board especially as it is the [second, third, etc] largest region in the international organization. I completed all of the necessary prerequisites in order run for the position. I created brochures, competed in debates, and took part in question and answer forums. The night of the election I presented a speech which was concise and truly from my heart. After my two counterparts gave their speeches it was time for my peers to vote...I lost! My disappointment was excruciating and overwhelming. Second place had no meaning or job description for me.

At that moment I thought about quitting the organization, going home and never leaving my house again. However, I knew I loved the organization and wanted to find another way to make a difference.

Months later I was appointed coordinator of a weekend convention for my region. This event is the biggest and most attended local conference of the year. While I was not elected to the regional position I wanted, I accomplished the leadership goals I set for myself and feel that the skills I used and the skills I learned will be beneficial to my future leadership opportunities at [blank] University.

This is a very good “skeleton” draft. All the things an application essay needs are here. There is a story of triumph, ending with a declaration of ability. One problem, however, is that more space is used to describe the loss than the recovery. Only a few sentences are dedicated to your success and your actual abilities. Give your reader more specifics of what you did well. What was involved in planning the weekend convention? Similarly, your opening statement turns out to be false. You did come in second, and managed to do something memorable. Think of changing your opening (p.s. – you are allowed to disagree with a quote, even if it is from Charles Schulz). (p.p.s – Tell your reader who Charles Schulz is.)

Okay, this is a tough essay - the “challenging experience” essay. The first question is: do you want the admissions committee to know you as the person who came in second place? Even though you learned a lot from the experience, you are still highlighting the fact that you didn’t get the position and spend more time talking about the disappointment, rather than on the positive (and impressive) experience of putting on a convention. Also, unless you absolutely have to write about a challenging experience, I would avoid this essay if you haven’t really overcome adversity in a serious way. Having perspective as a young person is a quality we love to see in applicants. When someone I babysat for was going through the admissions process, she was stumped on what to write about because she thought she had to have had something terrible happen to her to get into college. She said “I live in the suburbs, I like math, I play tennis and my parents aren’t even divorced! What do I write about?” I was so sad because this really wonderful young person was trying to make up a “difficult situation” to “get into college.” In fact, she, like many young people, has a pretty nice life. Be excited about this, have a healthy perspective – write about what you are good at, what makes you tick. In this essay, I see tremendous potential in writing about leading a group of peers in a weekend convention. I bet there are a few great stories from this experience that highlight your leadership skills. Why focus on not being elected? Focus on what makes you strong!

I would very much agree with my colleagues here. We ask something similar in my graduate program; and the answer is really much more about YOUR development and YOUR looking forward than it is about the actual failure or

scenario. Your last paragraph, currently your shortest, could actually be the front-runner. I might start there, explain how you got to grow and develop, and then give the backgrounder. The forward FUTURE is much more important than how you got there! PS. "Going home and never leaving your house again" is a bit dramatic!

Essay #3:

Through various customs, holidays, events, and spurts of creativity, I have become the hybrid of a folklorist father's passion for the traditions of his Moroccan Jewish ancestors and a Hoosier Jewish mother's dream to engulf her child in the cultural community she never had growing up. I have always been proud of my heritage and, after growing up learning all aspects of it, can actively participate through the Jewish youth group that I am involved in.

At a young age, my parents started teaching me the importance of custom. Every Friday night, we would always have a splendid feast to celebrate the Sabbath with elaborate Moroccan dishes. Every holiday would involve a grand celebration at the home, with a retelling of the stories of each holiday, lots of food, and a blend of customs.

Then, for my fifth birthday, my father revived the discarded tradition of a mock marriage of Moroccan Jewish children. He spent at least a year preparing my wedding costume, a pink silk elephant for my groom to ride on, and a purple velvet chair for me. The celebration was held at my Jewish preschool, where my guests and I played Moroccan games, ate Moroccan delicacies, and danced to Moroccan music. The only nontraditional part was my choice in a "husband", for my preschool sweetheart was a Roman Catholic. Overall, I thought this was the best way to celebrate one's fifth birthday party, especially because it was featured in the April 29, 1993 edition of the Los Angeles Times.

My parent's fervor did not stop there- soon I was modeling a Moroccan water seller outfit and playing with traditional toys my dad replicated from his childhood memories. Later, they encouraged me to join a Jewish youth-led leadership organization, and were very pleased when I became active in the B'nai Brith Youth Organization (BBYO). I quickly moved up the ranks of BBYO from holding important positions in my chapter to being elected to the esteemed position of Regional Sh'lichah, the programming vice president in charge of Jewish heritage, community service, and social action for all BBYO members in the [city, state, etc.] region. In addition, I participated in BBYO's Passport 2 Israel program, which allowed me to learn about the political situation in Israel, pick up some Hebrew, make new friends, meet my family, and begin to discover everything that the Jewish homeland has to offer.

Through years of ceremonies, holidays, and other cultural events, I became appreciative of my heritage, and put my knowledge of it to good use through planning Judaic activities in BBYO. I am proud to say that at this point in my life I can truly value my unique heritage, and the significance it has held on my overall life. I plan to continue to discover my Moroccan Jewish background, and hope to do so through classes and communal activities in college. I know

that my rich heritage will continue to be a source of inspiration for whatever I do in my future life.

What is best about this application essay is that your personality really shines through. What you need to do for your second draft is simple: slow down. You can present a meaningful, organized essay without losing any of the wit and gusto of the first draft. How does the Moroccan wedding connect to your BBYO experiences? Write for yourself a few sentences explaining this connection and see if they might fit into your essay. When that is done we can focus on overall organization and your intro paragraph, which is bold and exciting but still needs some work.

Your essay doesn't need to include as many details of your BBYO involvement; hopefully, you have put that in an activities list or resume. It is more important to continue painting the picture of your unique Moroccan identity. The description of the mock wedding allows the Admissions committee to really see your experience, rather than you just telling us you have different customs. "Show. Don't tell." The best advice for a successful college essay! These few paragraphs are a fun snap shot of your culture and identity. Tighten up your sentence structure and remember to separate your thoughts with paragraphs. Overall, this concept of identity, with a good story to illustrate can be one of the best "types" of personal statements.

So to summarize some tips for good essays:

1. Show. Don't tell.
2. Have perspective.
3. It's not what you say, but how you say it that is most important. Although, I didn't spend much time talking about grammar, punctuation and syntax, this is VERY important.
4. Remember this is your chance to leave the admissions committee with a snap shot of you in your own words. What do you want us to know? Remember this with whatever essay prompt you use. Is this how I want to use this opportunity to talk directly to the people who are making the admissions decision?

I love what you have chosen to write about; and agree that I did not really understand the connection to B'nai Brith and thought this was more about your upbringing. I also want to encourage you to TAKE OWNERSHIP of this background; much of what you talk about is a result of your parents' suggestions and input. While I know at age 5 you probably did not have much to say about all of it, you certainly learned and grew as a result. If it's a B'nai Brith essay, I might flip it by starting with where you are now; and how your background has allowed you to get to this place. You have A LOT of energy in this essay; and your imagery is great. I think it just needs some tightening.

Essay #4

As an American Jew, religion has always been important to me. Throughout high school, challenges have made it difficult to maintain my faith in adversity. I have no hesitation in saying that my youth group has been the chief influence in my life. The B'nai B'rith Youth Organization was started in 1924 by boys who were not allowed admittance into a Greek fraternity. Thousands of Jewish youth have entered its proverbial doors as boys, and left as men.

I've spent four years of my life completely and entirely devoted to BBYO. I've met people from all across the world whom I consider family. As a senior, I hope only to be as positive a role model as were those who came before me. I have striven to gain as much as I could from this order, and I still struggle to give back as much as it has given me.

There are many good turns of phrase in this essay and some very good ideas. However, you need to decide what your overall statement about yourself is and how your experiences in BBYO have helped you. Then you can start organizing your paragraphs into topics so that your personal statement has a more readable flow. Each sentence here could be its own paragraph.

Essays on identity can be very powerful statements about an applicant, and I think tying the experience of BBYO into your Jewish identity is great. This essay is fine, but it is also important to write about why your Jewish identity is important to you or how BBYO has influenced you. This is a great beginning. Flesh it out more. Reflect a bit more on your relationship with Judaism and the words will flow. You mention that high school challenges have made it difficult to maintain your faith – how so? How did BBYO allow you to overcome those challenges (or was it something else). More detail will make this a strong essay.

I think that there is a lot to say here as well; and I would love to hear details on how you have grown as a result of your involvement. What has it given to you specifically? I like the sense of history that you start with; do you want to use that history moving ahead to talk about the legacy you hope that you have left? I agree with my colleague from Brandeis that some good brainstorming will get some nouns and verbs out on paper that you will really be able to work into this essay. I would try one or two more sentences in each of the topics you mentioned; high school adversity; what you've gotten out of BBYO, and how you will use this moving forward in your life (as far as give-back)

Essay #5

I sat in the corner of the basement staring into the eyes of thirty strangers. As anxiety overwhelmed me, I began to feel uncomfortable with my surroundings; it was a Saturday night and instead of socializing with my friends, I was one of three eighth graders attending my first ever B'nai Brith Youth Organization program. The seniors and other members were gossiping about people, singing songs, and playing games I did not know, and I believed that I

would never fit in. However, my moment of self-pity didn't last long because a sophomore named Josh was about to change my life. Josh recognized my misery and took me out of the program. He sat me down on the couch upstairs, introduced himself, the chapter, and BBYO. Josh talked to me about BBYO and his own experiences within it, but more importantly, he welcomed and included me with open arms. Four hours later, the chapter advisor told us to end our conversation and we reluctantly rejoined the group. Josh and I have stayed incredibly close throughout our BBYO careers, but I will always remember him by that conversation. Josh showed me the unconditional acceptance present in BBYO, and he showed me that the inherent sense of fraternity transcends both age and experience....

[Parts of essay removed]

I began running my program and reading my speech. As I looked around the room, I saw someone hiding in the shadows. I approached the student, and I could see the insecurity in his eyes. I asked him what was wrong, and he responded that he didn't believe he belonged at this program. I told him that I understood and asked him to join me outside to talk. For the next four hours, I talked to this young 8th grader, and I returned a favor. It is my time to change lives, and BBYO allows me to do that. It has taught me invaluable leadership skills and created numerous friendships, but it has done more than that. BBYO is more than a youth group to me; it is an opportunity to change lives and to grow in ways I never thought possible.

The way that the experience of BBYO brought you from follower to leader is very well illustrated. What is missing, however, is how you plan to use this experience in the future. How will what you've learned benefit the college to which you are applying. The risk that this essay runs is being too narrow. Tell your reader a bit more about yourself outside of BBYO. Also, avoid phrases like "incredibly close" when you could show us.

As a topic for your personal statement, this is a good one. BBYO certainly changes young people's lives, gives them confidence and allows them to feel a part of a larger community. I did get this from your essay. I also see that you are grateful for the time your friend Josh took to make a connection and in turn you were able to "repay the favor." This is a good start.

To make it even better, I offer a few thoughts. First, the structure of the essay seems more stream of conscience rather than a formal essay. Although, a formal essay is not required, I might have liked to see a small introduction and, more important, a transition between your first paragraph about Josh and the one about you. Right now, I actually thought there were two essays and didn't realize it was the same essay until I finished the second paragraph.

Second, in addition to an introduction and transition, the ending could be strengthened. Perhaps, expanding on what "leadership skills" means to you when talking about your role in BBYO.

Finally, as a “Personal Statement,” we want to really get a sense of who you are as a person and how you view the world. The essay is your time to put your voice into the application. Ask yourself “is this what I want the admissions committee to think of me from my words?”

I want to hear more examples of how BBYO has meant so much to you with specifics. I have a good sense that Josh was great to you when you were in 8th grade and that you did the same thing for another newcomer. How about what happens in between; did BBYO teach you about leadership and community engagement (use examples) that encouraged you to reach out to him? I think that there’s a great continuity here but that the “middle part” is missing. You also are more narrative in the past than you are looking forward. What does all this mean NOW and how will it impact the community you want to be a part of at university? You’ve got a great base here. I would cut back a bit on the story telling and insert what you have learned.

Essay #6: Excerpts which explain BBYO’s structure:

BBYO has one international level, and this level is divided into 44 North American regions and another 6 foreign districts. The regions are further divided into chapters, with approximately 20 chapters per region. My journey began on the chapter level. After a few terms on board, I ran for chapter president and became the youngest president in the history of my chapter. I was responsible for running a chapter of 46 people, and overseeing all chapter events and meetings. Eventually I worked my way up to the [blank] regional board. In December 200X, I was elected as the Regional President of [region], and I still hold that office today. I am responsible for overseeing [state, city, etc] and running all activities within [region]. Most members never reach regional board, but that wasn’t good enough for me. I thought I could help BBYO on a much grander scale. So this past summer, I ran for the international board. I was elected onto a five-member board, and my job is to oversee the 16,000 members of BBYO.

It is certainly important to drive home how special it is to rise to regional president and being able to use figures to back up a claim is equally important. But numbers don’t mean anything without some specifics. In your next draft, try to find a more subtle way to convey the numbers. Also, tell me what you have done as a leader, how did handling these sorts of numbers challenge you to become better, and how will those skills help you in the future? As it stands, this paragraph comes across as haughty and impersonal.

Be careful with your sentence structure. The sentence, “Most members never reach regional board, but that wasn’t good enough for me,” needs to be revised. What wasn’t good enough? That most members never reach regional? If the writing is sloppy, it won’t matter what you’ve done in BBYO.

I assume this essay would be used as a “short answer” for extra-curricular involvement question. Well, for Brandeis, we know BBYO really well so don't feel the need to use the space for this type of explanation, however, for other schools it is fine to explain the structure. If I were you, I would first discuss the mission of the organization and the purpose. I think it is intuitive for anyone in admissions to recognize that being elected to an “international” or regional board is a big deal. Understanding the purpose of the organization is more important to understanding the applicant than describing the entire structure. If you submit a resume or activity list, in addition to the list on the Common Application, you wouldn't need to send this explanation, as hopefully the resume would imply or explain this information as it relates to you. Also, because you are saying that it “wasn't good enough for me” to just stay on regional board, I would want to know why.

I still want to know about YOU! I understand that you have done a great job of getting to where you are with BBYO and that is really impressive. I would echo my colleague's impressions that you could talk more about the impact and skills you have developed and hope to use moving forward (which for us is more important than the number of people in the organization) I'd be excited to learn about YOUR impact and involvement. Your passion to “serve” is wonderful, but I am still not sure what it means to you other than title.

Essay #7

I always loved taking part in activities, but, as a child, I was somewhat cautious and prudent. The experience of joining Leadership class in my sophomore year demonstrated to me that my persistence and willingness to take chances could be rewarded; I discovered that I love organizing events, and that I am capable of being a leader.

Enrollment in Leadership is highly coveted at my school, especially for sophomores; only one or two are offered a spot each year. Although I was surprised and thrilled to be accepted, I was assigned the position of Director of Clubs, instead of the position I interviewed for, Director of Publicity. I was slightly dejected not to have received my first choice, but figured this was a position given to beginners, and I shouldn't take it personally.

By viewing my opportunity in a positive way and making the most of it, I had a very rewarding experience. Not only did I oversee more than fifty clubs on campus, I was put in charge of five major events. I remember being scared that each of my events would be a disaster, but due to my hard work organizing them (and my ability to quickly find solutions for last-minute problems) each one was applauded as a complete success. I felt extremely honored to be given so much responsibility as a mere sophomore, which pushed me to work even harder.

Motivated by my success in Leadership class, I sought out more leadership positions outside of school in my junior year. I became very involved in the B'nai Brith Youth Organization (a Jewish youth-led leadership group), and ran for the chapter position of Sh'lisha, the programming vice-president in

charge of Jewish heritage, community service, and social action. This position fit me perfectly because of my love for my Jewish identity and my interest in serving the community. So, at the next Regional Convention (covering the [city, state,etc] area), I ran for the position of Regional Sh'lichah- and won!

Not long after being elected, I jumped into the demanding duties of planning and leading BBYO High Holiday services, which were also open to the public. Planning these services was difficult, to say the least -- I had to assign thirty members a different prayer to read at each service, which approximately [###] people attended -- but the feeling of success at hearing "These were the best services I've ever been to!" eliminated all previous feelings of stress and nervousness (especially when the mikes went crazy during the Yom Kippur service, making it sound like God was blowing the Shofar at us!).

In addition to being Regional Sh'lichah, this year, I finally hold the title of Director of Publicity in Leadership. Looking back, I never could have guessed that deciding to take a risk and applying for a Leadership class back in sophomore year would open the door to a passion for being a leader in my school and community. I also realize that through persistence I can take an opportunity and turn it into a success, and I hope that [Blank] University will allow me to have these opportunities in the future.

I would suggest you do two things to improve this personal statement. 1) Clarify. Write in one sentence everything you want this essay to convey. This makes it easier for the reader to understand what he or she is reading for. 2) Refine. Rather than just rattling off your resume, which is certainly impressive, show your growth as a leader through decisions you've made or attitudes that have changed.

Your closing two sentences are nicely done but I question the word "persistence." Your essay was about the benefits of confidence. If you want to write about persistence, then you must support that above.

I really like this essay. You aren't claiming to be rocket scientist, but you are showcasing the natural progression of your development as a leader with concrete examples. I might not even bother writing that you wanted to be the Director of Publicity in Leadership first -- it doesn't seem all that necessary -- your enjoyment of your other positions and examples of success make for a good story on its own.

You may want to hone in on the specifics of your involvement. I know that you wanted one position, you got another- and then you got really involved with BBYO. It seems that if BBYO is more of a focus for you, you may want to really strengthen that part of the essay. I got a great sense of your energy and your passion for the organization (and I loved the Shofar line) you will also want to think about what "being a leader" means for you. In your opening you suggest that it's about organizing events- is this the case or is there more for you?? Also, your last sentence is vague. I would actually find something you want to lead at the University and input it there (if possible) Right now I feel like you could finish

more strongly than you have. You have a great style with the imagery and a lot to build on here.