



Elite Education Student Service

“Puzzles”

Anonymous

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When my grandmother came to visit five years ago, she brought me a 3,000 piece jigsaw puzzle. To most, this would not sound very exciting—it would be almost as bad as a shirt saying “My grandparents went to India, and all they bought me was this stupid shirt.” My reaction to the puzzle was different. I cut open the cardboard box as soon as I could, and poured the pieces out onto my puzzle board. I worked patiently on the puzzle for hours at a time, my excitement building as more and more of the picture was revealed. I cut down my sleep time until the image of a picturesque forest was complete. The puzzle overshadowed all else in my life, if only for that short period of time.

Working on puzzles has helped me gain focus, determination, and patience. I have learned to apply these qualities to every task I face, dealing with the outside world in the same fashion as I would a puzzle. My love for science stems largely from this; science requires the same logical and levelheaded approach that a puzzle does, and as evidenced by the many puzzles decorating my house, this is an approach which suits my skills and temperament. This intellectual stimulation, coupled with a desire to discover more about life’s mysteries, compels me to pursue a career in scientific research.

This summer, I worked in a cardiology laboratory at UCLA, looking at proteins associated with HDL to understand how atherosclerosis can be averted. After some experiments provided questionable results, I was given the task of confirming that the viruses we were working with had been packaged and identified correctly. I spent weeks running DNA



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gels, looking for specific genes in each virus, but my results were inconsistent. I was frustrated, but instead of giving up on my assignment, I was even more determined to find an explanation. I considered every aspect of the experiment, working backwards until I reached the source—the primers I had used to amplify the DNA were nonspecific and ineffective, and thus useless in distinguishing the three genes of interest to us. Knowing this, I was able to alter my experiment accordingly, looking at protein content instead of DNA sequences. I finally showed that two of the three viruses were correct; the third, however, needed to be repackaged. My work was crucial to the undergraduate student I was working with, because he was able to redesign his experiment to account for this third virus. Working in a lab was an exhilarating experience for me. Even though I gave up lying on the beach to instead play with viruses and chemicals, the compulsion to understand these proteins inspired and motivated me. I am tremendously proud of the piece I contributed to the atherosclerosis puzzle: a small piece, but integral nonetheless. The sense of accomplishment I felt because of my work in the UCLA lab was much the same as that which I felt upon completing the 3,000 piece puzzle my grandmother gave me. This feeling is one I hope to experience throughout my life, because the atherosclerosis puzzle is most assuredly not the last such puzzle I will work on.



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Analysis

The writer’s essay takes a tangible theme—puzzles—and uses it in a variety of ways to demonstrate her interests, passions, and values. Her writing is engaging because it plays with many different senses of the word “puzzles,” so the theme doesn’t feel tired or redundant. She begins her essay with a reference to a 3,000-piece jigsaw puzzle that her grandmother gave her. Her subsequent use of humor (“To most, this would not sound very exciting—it would be almost as bad as a shirt saying ‘My grandparents went to India, and all they bought me was this stupid shirt’”) effectively draws readers in. This statement also sets up an expectation that most people would not be thrilled by this gift but that the writer is not “most people.” We can see that she is devoted to completing the impressively large puzzle by her mention that she even sacrificed sleep in pursuit of her goal. In her second paragraph, the writer links this pastime to her intellectual interests. She makes a clear and compelling comparison between puzzles and scientific research, noting that both require a “logical and levelheaded approach.” She demonstrates self-knowledge when she notes that this “suits [her] skills and temperament.” This analysis is very explicit and may seem to violate the “show, don’t tell” rule; but in her case, it helps us make the connection between puzzles and science—a connection that might not be immediately clear—and does so with precisely the “logical and levelheaded approach” that she describes. It is important to remember that rules like “show, don’t tell” are meant as guidelines but can be flexibly interpreted. It is best not to sacrifice one’s personal voice for writing “rules,” which are best thought of as recommendations. The beginning of the third paragraph takes us away from puzzles but aptly illustrates her dedication to a career in scientific research. Using an appropriate level of vocabulary, she describes her research at a UCLA



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cardiology lab. This demonstrates that she can explain complex ideas in clear and concise terms, a great strength for any researcher. The laboratory provides a different context for us to see the writer's response to challenging problems as well as a tireless resolve to solving any mystery.

The final paragraph nicely wraps up the essay by referencing the 3,000-piece jigsaw and her lab work to illustrate the broader theme of solving puzzles. We can see that the writer is both proud of her work (it is "integral") and humble (it is "a small piece" of the atherosclerosis puzzle), and she is eager to apply her spirit of curiosity and enthusiasm to her future college endeavors.