

Option 3: “Buck Up” by Jill

Susan Lewis is a woman that very few people would consider a role model for anything. A fifty-something high-school dropout, she has little more to her name than a beat-up truck, a Jack Russell Terrier and a ragtag herd of aging and/or neurotic horses with which she's run a largely unsuccessful riding lesson program for twenty years with no business plan to speak of and little hope of ever turning a profit. She curses like a sailor, is perpetually un-punctual, and has an erratic and often terrifying temper.

I've taken weekly riding lessons with Sue since middle school, often against my own better judgement. Because for all her seemingly unredeemable qualities, she inspires me - not necessarily as a person I'd strive to emulate, but simply for her unwavering perseverance. In the five years I've known her, I've never once seen her give up on anything. She would sooner go hungry (and sometimes does) than give up on her horses and her business. She sticks to her guns on every issue, from political views to hay prices to her (frankly terrible) business model. Sue has never once given up on herself or her horses or her business, and she never gives up on her students.

My dad lost his job not long after I started high school, and horseback riding quickly became a luxury we couldn't afford. So I called Sue to tell her that I wouldn't be riding for a while, at least until my father was back on his feet.

I hadn't expected an outpouring of sympathy (Sue, as you may have guessed, isn't an overwhelmingly sympathetic person), but I certainly wasn't expecting her to yell at me, either. Which was exactly what happened. She told me in no uncertain terms that I was ridiculous for thinking that money should stop me from doing something I loved, and she would see me bright and early Saturday morning regardless, and if she had to drive me to the barn herself that she would, and I'd better be wearing a good pair of boots because I'd be working off my lessons until further notice.

Her refusal to give up on me said more than I could ever put into words. It would have been easy for her to just let me leave. But Sue was never a person to take the easy way out, and she showed me how to do the same. I worked harder in Sue's barn that year than I'd ever worked before, earning every minute of my riding time, and I'd never felt more proud of myself. In her own stubborn way, Sue had shared with me an invaluable lesson in perseverance. She may not be much of a role model in any other respect, but Susan Lewis does not give up, and I strive every day to live by her example.

Critique of “Buck Up”

The Title

We'll begin with the first thing any reader will notice: the title. If you think titles don't matter, think again. A good title can immediately pique your readers' curiosity and grab their attention. The title frames and focuses the words that follow. A missing title is a lost opportunity and a weak title is an immediate handicap.

Unfortunately, coming up with a good title can be remarkably difficult.

Jill's title "Buck Up" is good in some ways. For one, it's playful as Jill uses the phrase "buck up" in the idiomatic sense of showing some courage or backbone, but the word "buck" also relates to a bucking horse trying to throw its rider. Where the title falls a little short is with its clarity. We really don't know what the essay is about based on the title, and we can appreciate the title only after we have read the essay.

The Topic

I love the focus of Jill's essay. So many essays on an influential person have a tone of hero worship as the writer tells us how wonderful Mom or Dad or dead Grandma or Coach or Uncle Harvey is. Jill, however, focuses on someone who in many ways isn't even likable. Susan Lewis is unreliable, rude, poorly educated, and terrible at running a business. She is, as Jill points out, an unlikely person to choose for an essay on an influential person.

By focusing on Susan Lewis, Jill has accomplished two important things: she has crafted an essay on option #3 that isn't typical, and she has shown us that she can recognize the positive in a person who has a lot of negatives going for her. Put into other words, Jill has shown that she is a creative and open-minded thinker, two qualities that will impress the college admissions folks.

Finally, Jill successfully does all that the prompt asks -- she doesn't just describe the influential person, but also explains the influence. We learn that through Susan Lewis's influence, Jill has grown to appreciate hard work and perseverance.

The Tone

Striking the right tone can be a big challenge in an essay like Jill's. Jill has focused on a rather ridiculous woman, so it would be easy to come across as mocking or condescending. Indeed, Jill is quick to point out many of Susan Lewis's shortcomings. The essay's light and playful tone, however, comes across as loving and appreciative, not deprecating. Jill is clearly a skillful writer, and she has managed to provide just the right balance of levity and seriousness.

The Writing

"Buck Up" is not a perfect essay, but the flaws are few. I'd get rid of a couple of the cliché or tired phrases such as "sticks to her guns" and "back on his feet." The phrase "curses like a sailor" is also a bit overused, but I thought it added a colorful touch to the description of Sue. In the first sentence of the essay, "that" should really be "who" since the relative pronoun refers to a person, and in the second paragraph, I find the logic of "because" in the second sentence confusing. These are all small issues, but the essay, like any essay, does have room for improvement.

In general, however, Jill has proven herself a talented writer. From the very first paragraph, the essay has a pleasing variety of sentence types ranging from short and punchy to long and complex. The language is playful and engaging, and Jill has done an admirable job painting a rich portrait of Susan Lewis in a few short paragraphs. Every sentence and paragraph adds important details to the essay, and the reader never gets the sense that Jill is wasting space with a bunch of unnecessary fluff. This is important, for with the new 500-word limit on Common Application essays, there's no room for wasted words. At 478 words, Jill is safely within the length limit.

What I most admire about the writing is that Jill's personality comes through. We get a sense of her humor, her power of observation, and her generosity of spirit. A lot of applicants feel like they need to brag about their accomplishments in the essay, yet Jill shows how those accomplishments can be conveyed in a pleasingly understated way.

Final Thoughts

It's always important to keep in mind why colleges ask applicants to write essays. On a simple level, they want to make sure you can write well, something that Jill has demonstrated effectively with "Buck Up." But more significantly, the admissions folks want to get to know the students they are considering for admission. Test scores and grades don't tell a college what type of person you are other than one who works hard and tests well. What's your personality like? What do you truly care about? How do you communicate your ideas to others? And the big one--Are you the type of person we want to invite to become part of our campus community? The personal essay (along with the [interview](#) and [letters or recommendation](#)) is one of the few pieces of the application that helps the admissions folks get to know the person behind the grades and test scores.

Jill's essay, whether deliberately or not, answers these questions in ways that work in her favor. She shows that she is observant, caring, and funny. She demonstrates self-awareness as she narrates the ways in which she has grown as a person. She shows that she is generous and finds positive qualities in people who have a lot of negatives. And she reveals that she gets pleasure out of overcoming challenges and working hard to achieve her goals. In short, she comes across as the type of person who would enrich a campus community.

Option 4: “Wallflower” by Eileen

I wasn't unfamiliar with the word. It was something I remembered hearing since I was able to grasp the fine art of polysyllabic language. Of course, in my experience, it had always been subtly laced with negativity. They told me that it wasn't something I was supposed to be. They told me to socialize more -- okay, maybe they had a point there -- but to open up to strangers I didn't know from Adam? Apparently, yes, that was exactly what I was to do. I had to 'put myself out there,' or something. They told me I couldn't be a wallflower. Wallflower was unnatural. Wallflower was wrong. So my impressionable younger self tried her best not to see the inherent beauty in the word. I wasn't supposed to see it; no one else did. I was terrified to recognize its rightness. And that was where Charlie came in.

Before I get any further, I feel obligated to mention that Charlie is not real. I question whether that makes a difference -- it shouldn't, really. Fictional, factual, or seven-dimensional, his influence in my life is indisputable. But, to give credit where credit is overwhelmingly due, he comes from the brilliant mind of Stephen Chbosky, from the universe of his novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. In a series of anonymous letters to an unknown friend, Charlie tells his story of life, love, and high school: of skirting the fringes of life and of learning to make the leap. And from the first sentences, I was drawn to Charlie. I understood him. I was him. He was me. I felt acutely his fears of entering high school, his just-barely-perceptible separation from the rest of the student body, because these fears were mine as well.

What I didn't have, the singular distinction between this character and myself, was his vision. Even from the very beginning, Charlie's innocence and naiveté gave him an unparalleled ability to see beauty in everything and to acknowledge it without hesitation, exactly as I'd longed to allow myself to do. I had been scared to be the only one to value being a wallflower. But with Charlie came the promise that I wasn't alone. When I saw that he could see what I wanted to see, I suddenly found that I could see it, too. He showed me that the true beauty in being a wallflower was the ability to acknowledge freely that beauty, to embrace it for everything it was while still managing to 'put myself out there' on a level I hadn't thought myself capable. Charlie taught me not conformity, but the honest, open expression of myself, free from the vise-like fear of being judged by my peers. He told me that sometimes, they were wrong. Sometimes, it was okay to be a wallflower. Wallflower was beautiful. Wallflower was right.

And for that, Charlie, I am forever in your debt.

Critique of “Wallflower”

The Topic

The minute we read her title, we know that Eileen has chosen an unusual and perhaps risky topic. In truth, the topic is one of the reasons I love this essay. So many college applicants think their essay needs to focus on some monumental accomplishment. After all, to get admitted to a highly selective college one needs to have single-handedly rebuilt a hurricane-ravaged island or weaned a major city from fossil fuels, right?

Obviously not. Eileen tends to be quiet, thoughtful, and observant. These are not bad traits. Not all college applicants need to have the type of exuberant personality that can psych up a gymnasium full of students. Eileen knows who she is and who she is not. Her essay focuses on an important character in fiction who helped her be comfortable with her own personality and inclinations. Eileen is a wallflower, and she is proud of it.

Eileen's essay readily acknowledges the negative connotations bound up in the term "wallflower," but she uses the essay to turn those negatives into positives. By the essay's end, the reader feels that this "wallflower" could fill an important role within a campus community. A healthy campus has all types of students including those who are reserved.

The Tone

Eileen may be a wallflower, but she clearly has a sprightly mind. The essay takes its subject matter seriously, but it also has no shortage of wit and humor. Eileen takes a self-deprecating jab at herself for needing to socialize more, and she plays with the idea of what is "real" in her second paragraph. Her language is often informal and conversational.

At the same time, Eileen is never flip or dismissive in her essay. She takes the essay prompt seriously, and she convincingly shows that fictional Charlie had a profound influence on her life. Eileen strikes that difficult balance between playfulness and seriousness. The result is an essay that is substantive but also a pleasure to read.

The Writing

Eileen has accomplished an impressive task by covering her topic so well in under 500 words. There is no slow warm-up or broad introduction at the start of the essay. Her first sentence, in fact, relies on the essay's title to make sense. Eileen jumps into her topic immediately, and immediately the reader is drawn in with her.

The variety of the prose also helps keep the reader engaged as Eileen makes frequent shifts between complex and simple sentences. We move from a phrase like "the fine art of polysyllabic language" to a deceptively simple string of three-word sentences: "I understood him. I was him. He was me." The

reader recognizes that Eileen has an excellent ear for the language, and the essay's pacing and rhetorical shifts work well.

If I have one criticism to offer, it's that the language is a little abstract at times. Eileen focuses on "beauty" in her third paragraph, but the exact nature of that beauty is not clearly defined. At other times the use of imprecise language is actually effective -- the essay opens and closes with reference to a mysterious "they." The pronoun has no antecedent, but Eileen is abusing grammar deliberately here. "They" is everyone who is not her. "They" are the people who don't value a wallflower. "They" are the force against which Eileen has struggled.

Final Thoughts

While "I'm a wallflower" may be a conversation stopper at a social event, Eileen's essay is remarkably successful. By the time we finish the essay, we can't help but admire Eileen's honesty, self-awareness, sense of humor, and writing ability.

The essay has accomplished its most important task -- we have a strong sense of who Eileen is, and she seems like the type of person who would be an asset to our campus community. Remember what is at stake here -- the admissions officers are looking for students who will be part of their community. Do we want Eileen to be part of our community? Absolutely.