



Common App Essay Prompt #2: *The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?*

Perhaps the biggest failure of my life—at least, it felt like it at the time—came just one year ago. As a senior in high school, I sent out my university applications. With my nearly perfect grade point average and long list of extracurriculars, I was eyeing the moon. I applied only to Ivy League schools, so convinced was I that they would be virtually begging me to join their schools.

It was a smugness that makes me cringe today. Months later, I began getting the responses to my applications: Rejection, after rejection, after rejection. Not a single school had offered me admission, and I was forced to face the stark reality that not only was I much more average than I had believed, but that I had likely run out of time to apply for even the lowest-ranked college.

This was a devastating period for me. I cried and felt sorry for myself, yet I had to face the fact that I had only myself to blame. After a few weeks, I began to pick up the pieces, largely because of the hugely constructive help my parents gave me. My mom and dad sat me down and began laying out the various options I had. I could work for a year and save money. I could start at a community college in the winter semester. Or I could do as many Europeans are known to do, and I could take a “gap year”, traveling and thinking about my life.

Once I wrapped my head around it, the idea of a gap year spent traveling excited me more than enrolling at Harvard or Yale ever had. I immediately got a part-time job, and with the money I saved along with the help of my parents, I booked a ticket around the world.

It was sometime after my two weeks exploring Tokyo and Kyoto, and still sometime after my time relaxing at the beach in Thailand . . . probably while I was moving from hostel to hostel through Eastern Europe, with the gorgeous cities of Sofia, Belgrade, Budapest, and Krakow as my backdrops . . . that I began thinking about applying to university again.

As I sent in college applications—this time to a much broader and much more realistic range of schools—I remember sitting in a café in Iceland, reflecting on how devastating I had felt, and shuddering at where I would have been at that moment had I not faced such failure all those months ago.

This experience really hammered home to me the importance of failure as a learning tool. We cannot control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond. And sometimes the goals that we think are of paramount importance are, in actuality, not the best of possible paths.

Ironically, a few weeks after I returned home, my head full of new visions and new inspirations that I had never even thought possible, I checked the mail, and there it was: an acceptance letter from Columbia University, an actual Ivy League school. I received two more acceptance letters to other Ivy League schools in the weeks to come. Apparently the learning experience brought on by my failure was the missing piece of the puzzle after all.