



Stanford University
- Accepted College Essay -

A DIFFERENT KIND OF LOVE

When I was four years old, I fell in love. It was not a transient love-one that stayed by my side during the good times and vanished during the bad-but rather a love so deep that few would understand. It was not the love for a person, but the love for a language. It was the love for Spanish.

Having been born and raised behind the Iron Curtain, in a country where Western influence was limited and the official and only language was Romanian, I was on my own. Everyone around me, especially my family, had trouble understanding what could possibly draw me to such a foreign and, in their opinion, unattractive language. But as they say, love is blind, and the truth of the matter is that I wasn't even sure what it was exactly that made Spanish so fascinating to me. The only thing I knew was that I absolutely adored hearing its perfectly articulated phrases, and trying to make sense of its sweet and tender words: serenades to my innocent ear.

Spanish entered through my door on June 16th, 1994, when a man from the local cable company came to connect our living room to the rest of the world. That day, I was introduced to "Acasa," a Romanian cable network dedicated to broadcasting Spanish language telenovelas (soap operas) to Romanian audiences. As I learned to read, I started associating the Romanian subtitles with the Spanish dialogue, and little by little, I began understanding the language. For a little girl who had yet to discover new aspects of her own language, this was quite an accomplishment, but no one around me felt the same way. My father, enraged at my apparent "obsession" with the language, scolded me incessantly, declaring that:

"We are immigrating to the United States, not to Mexico! You should spend your time learning English instead of watching that nonsense!"

Sadly, my family's objection was only the first of many hardships I was bound to encounter. When I was nine, my immigration to the US forced me to say goodbye to what had become a huge and indispensable part of me. I needed to hear Spanish, to listen to it daily, and although Los Angeles could be considered a Spanish speaker's paradise, my largely Romanian neighborhood allowed for little interaction with the language. For six years, destiny kept us apart and the feelings that Spanish had evoked in me soon faded away.

But high school brought about a new era in my life, an era in which my love for Spanish was revived and greatly amplified. For an hour a day, life was put on hold and I was able to speak and read Spanish more actively than ever. After two years of Advanced Placement Spanish, I not only understood the language to perfection, but spoke it flawlessly as well.

There are no words that can describe how proud and greatly accomplished I feel today at my ability to speak Spanish. During a recent trip to Mexico, I was mistaken more than once for one of the natives. One man, after seeing my Romanian last name, asked me if it was my husband's, for undoubtedly, he believed, I was Mexican. Given to a Romanian girl, whose family members were oblivious to the language, and who had learned it on her own despite their objections, this was the greatest compliment of all. In the United States, Spanish is the second most spoken language and a great asset for anyone who speaks it. It is not "nonsense," as my father had dubbed it, and being able to prove this to him has made me even prouder for loving Spanish.

My love of Spanish has influenced much of who I am today. The fight that I led against family objections and immigration to a new land has allowed me to develop an ambitious and aggressive spirit in the face of adversity. It has made me stronger, and taught me that I must always fight with unstoppable perseverance for all that is important to me. I am determined to use my love and passion for Spanish to make an impact on the world. Currently, Spanish is the primary language of 21 nations around the globe, and one of the six official languages of the UN. I want to be the link that connects these nations to the United States, and to the 40 million Americans whose native language is Spanish. I want to use my ability to speak Spanish to learn more about the people of

these nations, both on a professional and personal level. no matter where the path of life takes me, I wish for Spanish to always be a part of me.

Through the years, Spanish has evolved into one of my most remarkable accomplishments. Today, I am prouder than ever of loving Spanish-of having something that distinguishes me from the rest, something that makes me unique. It is not often the case for a romanian- American girl living in Los Angeles to exhibit such passion and devotion towards a language that is foreign to both her native and adoptive countries. nevertheless, Spanish is a big part of whom I am today, and an even bigger part of who I will be in the future.

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN

“ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD” Is an astounding, intellectually challenging, and humorous concoction. Stoppard cleverly captures the characters of Hamlet, written by Shakespeare, but creates somewhat of a comic tragedy. Clearly an oxymoron, but profoundly effective. The play focuses on the story of Hamlet, but from the viewpoint of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and it also takes the theories proposed in Hamlet and presents them in a comic, rather than sullen, manner. One of the most humorous scenes is when Rosencrantz, or Guildenstern, since the distinction is never truly made between the two, is laying on a table and thinking to himself what it is like to be “dead in a box.” This scene proves to be hilarious, despite its deep meaning, and parallels the infamous “To be, or not to be” speech in Hamlet. Life’s unanswerable questions are constantly being asked throughout the play, but by inserting these dubious inquiries within a comedy, Stoppard is able to captivate and preserve his audience’s attention. In fact, the humor provides the wiring, which connects the messages of the play to our own chaotic existences. This brilliant literary work captures the essence of a tragedy within a comedy, something only few authors can accomplish. It is able to provide profound, theoretical ideas that have long been questioned into a comic perspective, and yet keep its integrity.

EXIT DOOR

I consider myself to be mature and focused in my life; I have goals that I strive for and a strong commitment to my education. However, I do have my more humorous moments, just as everyone else. For instance, a few summers ago, my family and I were in Las Vegas on vacation. The over-the-top looking-by-night, eyesore-by-day city was lighted everywhere, and masses of people were walking along the Las Vegas Strip. One night, we went out to dinner and were walking back to our hotel. When we got to the entrance of the hotel, which had automatic sliding doors, there was a huge line waiting to get in, yet there were many other doors to its side unoccupied. So, naturally, I said aloud, “Why don’t we just go through those doors,” as I pointed towards the unoccupied doors. My family just waited patiently, but I decided to go by myself, so I did, and I walked straight into the EXIT door. I am not sure who was more injured, myself, or my sister who collapsed onto the floor in convulsive laughter. I still have not heard the end of this story, but at least now I can laugh at myself. Many times people get discouraged in their hectic and stress-filled lives, but sometimes you just need a dim-witted accident to occur to put everything in perspective.

CUDDLE BUDDIES

The cold mid-august San Francisco bay fog was just beginning to roll in over Piedmont as I snapped the cover shut on Jennings Burch's book "They Cage the Animals at night," the most recent addition to my "get ready for 7th grade summer reading extravaganza." It is a story about a young boy who lives in various orphanages and foster homes with only his stuffed animal, Doggie, for companionship. My cousin from Connecticut had told me that it was a fabulous book, but little did I know how it would touch my life and the lives of others.

As I gazed across my room at the pile of stuffed animals I had been collecting since I was young, an idea came to me. I would collect stuffed animals for children like Jennings. First, I contacted local agencies that support children suffering from abuse and neglect and told them about my idea. They said that the stuffed animals would be very helpful in therapy and would certainly lift children's spirits.

I decided to call my project "Cuddle Buddies." now I actually had to come up with the "buddies"! I wrote articles for the local and school newspapers, telling Jennings' story and asking for donations of stuffed animals. My phone rang off the hook; schools, families, local businesses and toy manufacturers all wanted to help. Much to my delight this project took the Bay Area by storm. By the second week my living room looked like a zoo with animals tucked in every corner and on top of each chair. Every time my mom and I made deliveries to the agencies, the kids would be waiting for their Cuddle Buddies with their eyes down, too shy to look but shaking with excitement.

Six years after its launch, Cuddle Buddies continues to expand. Each year I solicit from more toy companies and communities. now over 25,000 stuffed animals have been donated to agencies in the Bay Area and Connecticut, emergency units, two orphanages in Africa and one in Germany. At the Saidia Children's Home in Kenya, Simon, a seven-year-old, whose parents died from AIDS, couldn't sleep at night. When the Cuddle Buddies were laid out for him to choose from, Simon selected a grey koala bear and soon after was sleeping through the night. My heart ached when I learned that a young girl in Oakland had stopped cutting herself so she could get the big black dog that she wanted so badly. I never dreamed that Cuddle Buddies would be used in these ways.

Knowing that I would be going on to college and that others my age could do what I have done, I decided to expand Cuddle Buddies. To spread the word beyond the Bay Area I designed a website, www.cuddlebuddies.net, and contacted newspapers and TV stations across the nation. The response was overwhelming. I heard from kids, parents, agencies and even The Girls Scouts. I am now helping to establish two dozen Cuddle Buddies chapters from Utah to North Carolina.

This has been a great experience. I have learned how to follow through on an idea, how to champion a cause and how to deal with setbacks. But most importantly, I have learned how easy it is to positively impact a life and the joy that comes from it. I will go to college with these lessons in mind and hope to continue my work with Cuddle Buddies, even as I engage in a whole new set of exciting academic and nonacademic pursuits.

THE HOUSE ON WELLINGTON AVENUE

A thin shard of sunlight sliced through the vent of the windowless, cold, and cramped one-bedroom basement apartment. The apartment stood three stories high with its weight suffocating the basement. I sat on the stained carpet, alone, playing with my one and only prized Hot Wheels car. My mother was working her ten-hour shift as a minimum wage waitress and my father was nowhere to be found. My father left our family when I turned three-years old. He also left the burden of his reckless gambling debt to my mother and left us to fend for ourselves. At the time, my mother barely spoke any English, yet she had to find work in order to support us. She became occupied with work, so I was frequently isolated at home. The house on Wellington Avenue in Daly City evolved to represent all the suppression my mother and I endured. As a child, wherever I could go to be away from the cell, I went.

A few days after my eleventh birthday, I trudged home on an afternoon to discover our house robbed again, this time of my mother's savings for the following month's rent and my new "Stingray 5000" water gun. I burst into tears and cried in my mother's fragile arms. It was that moment I vowed to do something about our situation. I was tired living in that horrid house, being deprived of my mother because of her demanding work schedule, and feeling like the whole world was constantly against us. Early in my childhood, I realized that our family was financially poor, because of that, I wanted to be rich in knowledge. Every day after school, I would take the transit to the Daly City Public Library where I could be away from the miserable house and focus on my studies. It was there that I would max out my library card to read Harry Potter novels and sit at the wide tables with my head in textbooks and magazines, searching for a better life. My mother knew the anger I had for the house, as a result, she would indirectly encourage me to channel out my negative feelings for the house into positive ones for learning by dropping by the library after work with apple juice for me. My appreciation for my mother is great because she still managed to set time aside from her work to attend to my needs. My objective was to gain all the knowledge I could, in hope of devising a plan to get us out of the Wellington Black Hole. At one point, I spent a whole Saturday looking for some sort of mathematical equation that would cure our blight. Enriching my knowledge was my naïve way of trying to improve and control our bleak situation. Fortunately, my mother's relentless effort for work allowed us to move to a better part of Daly City.

When I finally got my driver's license at the age of sixteen, after a vigorous curriculum of driver's education, driving lessons, and a driving test, the first place I drove my mother's old Toyota Camry was to the house on Wellington Avenue. The freedom of driving allowed me to explore a place where I had been trapped in for so long. Crouched on the warm cement, I glanced pass the faded wooden walls and peered through the constricting vent to see the three-year-old that once sat on the cold floor. As I stood with the sun shining on my back, I acknowledged that my mother and I were given a situation that we did not choose, but we ultimately became the ones who changed the course of our lives. A photo of the Wellington house sits on my bedroom window edge, casting a small shadow when sun light beams in. It serves as a painful reminder of my background, and an inspiration to continue excelling in life, even when unfavorable conditions dominate.

A DRAMATIC COUP

I sat there stunned for an instant, and then jumped as high as I could and screamed as loud as my voice would allow. Blood rushed through my entire body, while the butterflies in my stomach finally flew away. I had just received my LAMDA Diploma with Honors, a task that has only been done by one person before me. LAMDA, the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts, comes to my high school, as well as others in the states, and gives what are essentially acting exams. In these exams, you must perform a series of monologues, and to receive the Diploma you must perform four five-minute monologues, one pre-1910, one post-1980, one Shakespearean, and one of your choice. I had worked for weeks on my monologues, perfecting them as much as I could, staying after school, working at lunch, even at home, despite the shouting by my sister for me to stop. When it came time to perform, I was incredibly nervous; however, after I came out of my performance, I lingered outside the theater, waiting upon my results, and when they came, I was astounded. Not only was I able to pass my exam, but also I came out of it with greater knowledge of theater than I had when I started. I learned a great deal from taking these various exams, most notably the age old lesson that hard work does pay off. The personal splendor I felt was one that I had never felt before, and I live to feel it again.

MY BEDROOM

I ran around nervously, yelling at my parents to wait downstairs; I did not want them to see anything that was going on. I rushed as fast as I could to make my bed, something most teenagers do not usually do. I made sure everything was in proper order as I called my parents up to my room. As I placed the last pillow on the bed, I acquired a sense of completion and achievement. I had done it; I designed and redecorated my bedroom. It was at this point when I, in my heart, became an interior designer.

This picture represents more than just a bedroom to me; it is my first step on a path that I hope directs me to fulfillment. Designing my bedroom allowed me to explore the creative aspect of my life, and I was, and still am, able to appreciate the amount of creative talent I possess. It has become an intense passion in my life and I value this a great deal. This process illustrated the creative potential that I possess within myself, and I know that I can apply this promise in any aspect of my life.

One of the greatest features of this project I took on is that I was able to see the results of my actions immediately. It was a hands-on experience that I enjoyed to its fullest, and I was exultant with the outcome. Overall, this project was a great success in my eyes, and even in the eyes of my family and friends who are amazed at my capabilities with design. However, as the designer, I do get frustrated with infinitesimal flaws. On the wall to the left of my bed there are two shelves and framed artwork that I created myself. In the process of the installation, I centered these shelves and artwork on the wall; however, the palm tree that I placed in the corner covers up one of the frames. I now know that it probably would have been better if I moved the shelves and artwork to the left of the wall. The importance of this is not the flaw itself, but in the fact that I learned from what I had done and know how to improve myself the next time. Overall, I feel the room came out beautifully and it symbolizes my first true triumph with design.

Though this project meant a great deal to me emblematically, I also just had fun with it. Utilizing my imagination, and figuring out how I was going to make things work within the room was simply enjoyable. Not only was the design process pleasurable, but also the actual painting, nailing, and organizing itself was satisfying. I was also able to bond with my father through the project. He joined me in my most successful achievement of the room—the design and creation of the headboard. This venture and this picture epitomize my success. I consider my bedroom to be an elegant, contemporary work of art, and this picture embodies all the work I put into my design as well as the sense of achievement I received after its completion.

EXTRA PAGE

You've given me one more page to tell you about myself. Just one. There are only eight boxes for extra-curricular activities, only three lines to tell about my summers, just over two inches to write a note to my future roommate, and only one page to fill in all the holes, to color in all the blank space. Unfortunately both for me and for you, entire lives don't fit into boxes and personalities can't be completely sketched on paper. I have to do my best to show you who I am, and you have to do your best to find me in all this black ink. So, best of luck to you. As for me, I will write just one more page and hope it gives you a clearer image of who I really am.

You have noticed, I'm sure, my list of extra-curricular activities. What you can't see is the struggle that went into compiling that list. For one thing, my practice list was comprised of far more than eight activities, so I was forced to group things together and to leave things out. Every summer and winter, I travel with my youth group on a service trip, sometimes within this country, other times around the world. The summer before my freshman year and again two years later, we spent two weeks in Costa Rica, living with families there and working both helping build a renovation on a church there and playing with children in a refugee settlement called Pavas. The year in between, we ran a day camp for underprivileged children in San Antonio, Texas, and the summer before my junior year, we did various kinds of service in Columbus, Ohio. For our winter trips, we have done urban outreach in New York City and in Miami, trying to use those experiences to help our downtown church improve its outreach ministries. My service experience with church goes beyond these trips twice a year, though. I spend several evenings each year volunteering in the homeless shelter in my church's gym both with youth group and with my family. We also go as a family each year early on Christmas morning to serve breakfast at the shelter and celebrate the holiday with the guests. These are pieces of the categories I call "Central Presbyterian Church youth group" and "Community Service" that I didn't have space for in the box, but that mean a lot to me and play huge roles in my life.

Another experience that I haven't found a space for is the Maine Coast Semester, the four months I spent on Chewonki neck in Maine during the fall of my junior year. Although my essay provides one snapshot of the experience, it cannot possibly speak to everything the semester meant to me. Moving out of my family's house and into a cabin with six girls my own age was extremely exciting for me, and what I found when I got there was even better than what I had expected. It was a place I could relate to. In science class, we would learn to identify the trees and wildlife that were living just outside our cabins. In the afternoon, working on the farm, we would lovingly tend the animals and plants that we would then harvest, prepare in the kitchen, and eat. Each of us realized our connection to every other member of the Chewonki community and to the land itself, and learned to be responsible with that connection. When I was assigned to collect recyclables before breakfast for my morning chore, I showed up just as promptly and with just as much energy as when my chore was to milk the cows or to clean the bathrooms. Similarly, when a teacher asked me to read an assignment for homework, I got it done, not simply because I wanted to keep a good grade, but because the entire class depended on each person's individual preparation in order to have rich, meaningful discussion.

Coming home, I realized that here, too, I was connected to my community. Although it is larger than the one in Maine, I still have the same responsibility to those around me, and will have that responsibility to whatever community I am part of for the rest of my life. In my daily life, just like on my service trips, I try to look for chances to benefit something greater than myself. In college, I look forward to becoming part of a new community, and figuring out how to find my niche, so that I can serve that community as well as be served by it.

POLAR BEARS

The buzzing of the alarm clock suddenly stops and, to my surprise, I am awakened not by the noise but by the silence, rudely jerked from my sleep. Six forty-five, the numbers read. I pull my comforter tighter under my chin and close my eyes, fully intending to get up in a few minutes. I'm sure I'll wake back up in a few minutes, but not yet. I can't do it yet.

"Lolo!" someone's whispering to me, in my dreams I'm sure. "Lolo, get up! Aren't you coming?" Coming where? One instant of confusion. Only one blissful instant, and then it all makes sense. It's Saturday.

"Yeah, I'm coming." The listlessness of my voice surprises me. I groan and fold the thick layers of blankets off of me. The frigid December air pounces. As I watch, thousands of tiny bumps germinate on my arms, and the fine hairs stand alarmingly straight. After getting out of bed and pulling on my bathing suit, I eagerly throw my winter coat around my arms and shoulders. I debate crawling back in my bed. No one said I had to do it.

I look at my cabinmates, and I push that thought from my mind. Although Lucy and Tuna stay nestled in their beds, Cara is pulling a sweatshirt over her head. Emily and Constanza are standing quietly, fully dressed, and Sarah is duct-taping a pair of flip-flops on her bare feet. Shoes. I had almost forgotten. I open the door, and look down at our tiny porch. My tennis shoes are indeed there, frozen solid. I force the unyielding layers of ice around my feet, wincing. The laces crunch, and small crystals of ice fall gently to the floor as I tie a bow on each shoe. Everyone is ready. It's time to go.

I wrap my arm through Constanza's as we step off the last wooden step from the cabin. The air isn't so bad out here--probably a few degrees above zero. My feet begin to tingle and then to burn. We trudge through the snow as quickly as possible, and I'm sure my excitement is visible on my face.

Soon, we can see the water of the Sheepscot river, stained with thin sheets of ice. Most people would say we're out of our minds. My friends back in Atlanta will call me crazy. I grin. Squeezing Constanza's hand on one side and Emily's on the other, I stumble through the mud left by the receding tide.

"One, two, three!" We count together and sprint into the icy water, diving under the surface just for an instant. As we clamber out of the water and toward our chilled towels, our semester-mates cheer wildly. The next threesome heads toward the water.

Later in the morning, the thirty-six students at Maine Coast Semester file into the dining hall for breakfast, about twenty of us dripping wet and beaming. Five of us sport shorts and sunglasses in a foolish attempt to defy the cold. I follow my friends to a table where a large book stands open, and sign my name under the heading "Polar Bears: December 7." As I sit eating my bagel, I catch the eye of a wet-headed polar bear across the room and we smile together.

MOVING

The quick ripping of the thick tape and the heavy thuds of cardboard boxes echo throughout an empty, unfamiliar, and lonely house. As the heavy boxes are slowly opened and their contents revealed, my young heart jumps for joy. There, within that scant and unexpectedly durable shell of cardboard, lie my invaluable possessions. After removing the bubbly layer of protection from my valuables, I begin to place them, one by one, onto my familiar, yet strangely new shelf.

I first lift out my ragged and faithful stuffed animal Mr. Teddy. Though torn, dirty and missing his left eye, he reminds me of my youth and the one constant friendship in my life. He has traveled with me thousands upon thousands of miles to and from each of the seven vastly different living experiences that have defined my life. Mr. Teddy has been there with me throughout the difficulty of every one of the transitions in my life.

Next, I pull out a small, fragile lamp decorated with blue and white pinstripes. A small yellow duck lives at the bottom of the glass compartment. As I fumble with the rotating switch, I see that only two of the three different settings are properly working. Now, after years of travel, only the nightlight and brightest setting work. I leave the light on at its brightest setting and place it on my night table. The brightness comforts me.

I return to the box to pull out my thick, denim blue journal and my favorite ink pen. I flip through the pages, pausing to glance at my informal collection of favorite pictures of friends, articles, and tidbits of memories that I have compiled through the stages in my life. I open to the last section of the book and glance at my favorite quotations alphabetically sorted by subject and author. I look up Woody Allen and smile at his ridiculously funny honesty and place my journal on the ledge next to my window.

After refueling my ink pen I scoop up my carefully packaged rosary and Bible. As I crack open the case, the pearl white beads of my rosary glint in the sunlight and my ivory covered Bible, given to me on my First Communion, opens to the front page. There, written in my aunt's handwriting, is a greeting written in Spanish and signed by my now deceased grandparents. These two items represent one of my only connections to my relatives and the history of my family in Colombia: a common religion and a belief in Providence.

After saying a quick prayer of thanksgiving I pull out my final and most necessary possession. The dust flies off the glass as I blow across the surface. There, under the grime of travel, lies my own face fixed in time. Enclosed within a light maple frame, a color photograph captures my eleven-year-old self-clothed in bright purple soccer shorts and a white sleeveless uniform shirt. My hair is tightly pulled back in the quintessential ponytail, sweat dripping off my skin and dirt covering my socks. My face is frozen in an expression of relief, domination, and triumph after scoring the game-winning goal in the merciless sun of a Houston summer. I study the image and wipe a single tear from my eye. My knee aches sympathetically, and I prepare to hang the picture. As I pick up the hammer, I realize that although soccer is no longer a part of my life, I have filled the vacancy in my heart with other challenging and significant activities that I have grown to love with the same fervor. That picture, though simple, encompasses the passion that is my life. It will forever symbolize for me the love and dedication I have for everything I do.

With a last glance, I hang the heavy frame on the wall. The box is empty, unlike the room. Although the room is only filled by a few items, it is occupied by the only items I will ever need for the rest of my life: friendship, humility, self-expression, family, god, and passion.

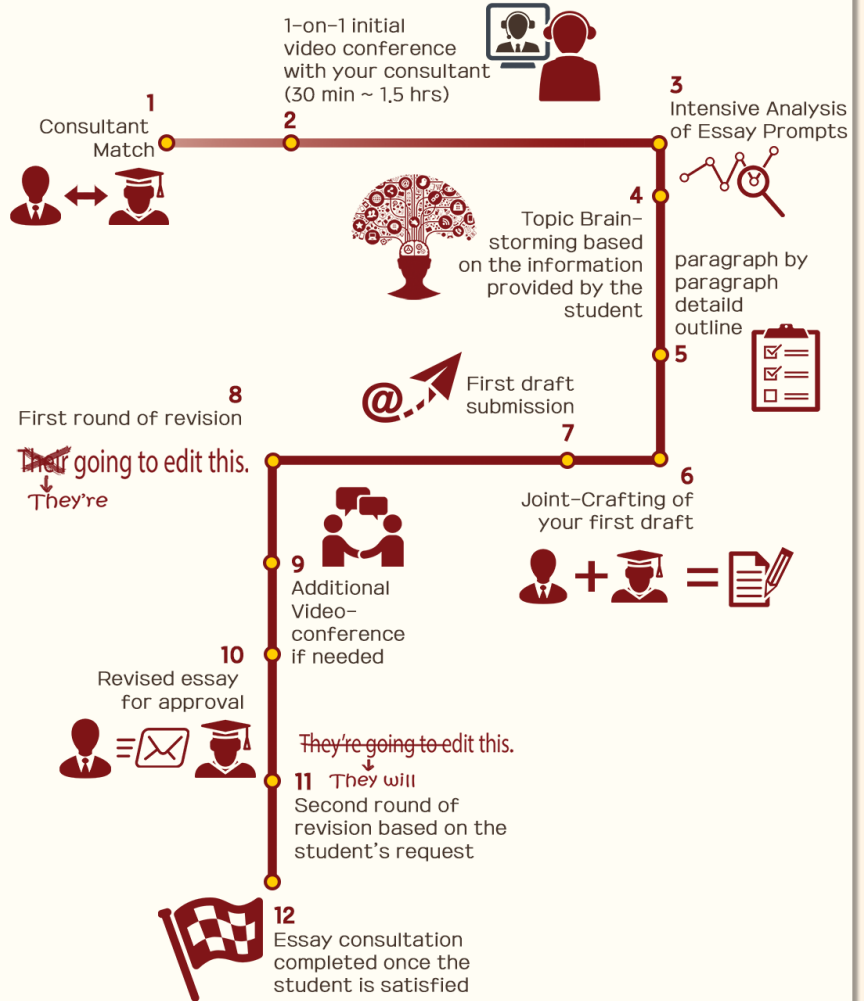
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