



University of Michigan

- Accepted College Essay -

I trudged onward at the exhausting pace set by my commander. The stripes of mud on my face mixed with the sweat of the desert, running into my tired eyes. I was not allowed to roll up my pants or long sleeves—the enemy might see my white arms or legs. The M-16 grew heavier as I carried it hour after hour. "Azar!" yelled my commander. I ran as fast as I could, counting in Hebrew, "Esrin v'echad! Twenty-two! Twenty-three!" On twenty-four, I flung myself to the ground, covered my head, and crossed my ankles. That was when the rimon, the hand grenade, exploded.

"If you had been any slower, you would have been dead!" my mefakedet, commander, yelled. That was field day, the day I spent emulating Israeli soldiers as part of Gadna, a week-long program that Israeli high school teens attend before entering Tzahal, the Israeli Defense Forces. This experience was just one of the eleven weeks I spent last fall at the Alexander Muss High School in Israel. The course emphasized the reality of life as an Israeli. At first, I relished the novelty of it, but soon I truly came to understand the harsh reality of life in Israel.

Throughout Gadna, I watched the majority of Israelis mock their commanders, ignoring them as if they were simply reveling in a seaside Tel-Aviv café. I was shocked by their behavior and couldn't understand their motives, but as the week wore on, I stumbled upon the true meaning. For an American tourist (for that was what I was), Gadna was exactly what it is, a simulation of the army. For Israelis, it, too, was just a game, but because they knew that soon the game would end and they would become real soldiers, they relished all the free time they had left.

Often, as I trained in the Israeli wilderness, I would see (or feel) the Sabra cactus, a prickly, green cactus that bears sweet red fruits. I would watch these tough kids rolling over the cacti without a grimace and yet, later that day, I would see them eating the sweet, fleshy fruit with a laidback smile on their faces. Thus, I inevitably stumbled across the true mold of Israelis, the secret success of their society—the sabra. Like the sabra, the harsh environment Israelis have been subjected to for so long forced them to evolve the tough, thorny skin of sabras that is evident on the street, at the cafés, and in the army. The rough, outer layer, compelled to absorb the cruelty of life in the Middle East, gives way to a sweet, juicy heart, full of love and the will to live amidst a war of terrorism. Because of this, so many Israelis lay down their schoolbooks, hoes, or guitars for an M-16 and fight, simply to exist.

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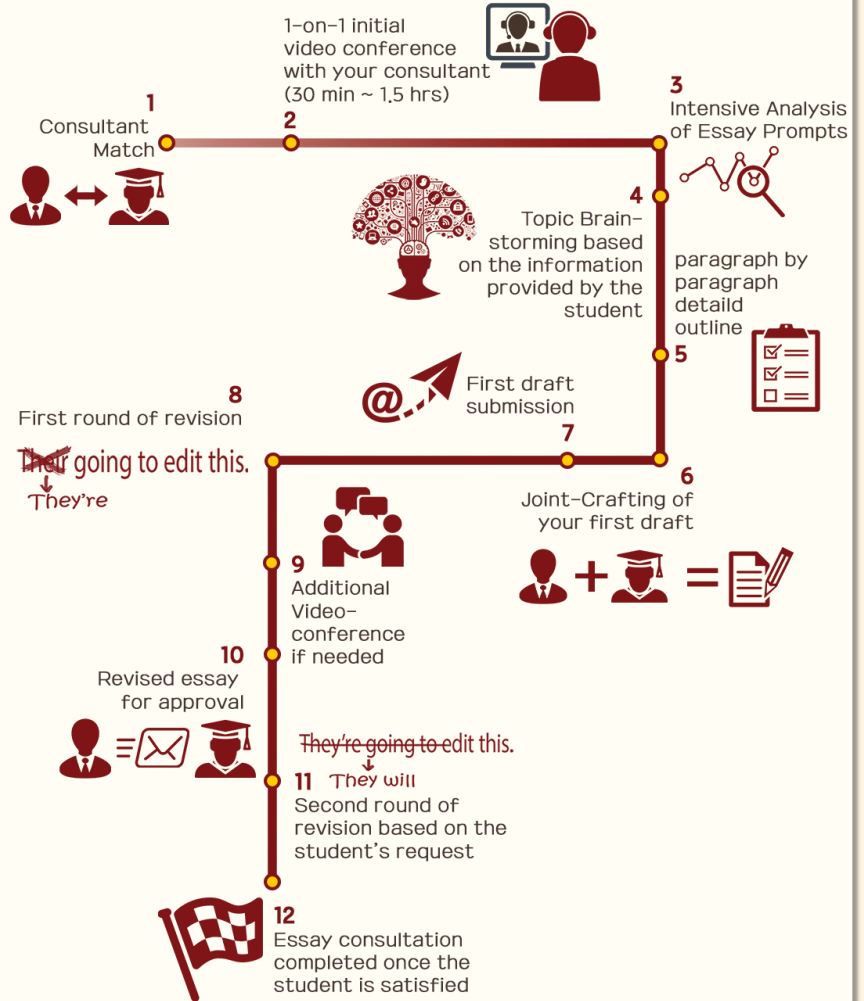
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