

56. Essay on Academics

My academic performance has almost always been good. I graduated from high school with a 4.0 grade point. In college I seemed to be a “whiz kid” at first, earning almost enough credits to graduate in two years rather than the usual four. Unfortunately, only nine hours away from my degree, I discovered an exciting social life and eventually dropped out because I had withdrawn from so many classes. There wasn’t much point in pretending I was really interested in college. Eighteen months of unrewarding, poorly paid work renewed my interest, so I returned to OU, completing my B.A. and M.A. Even though my record shows that I have made good grades in all subject areas, I have both strengths and weaknesses in the four major academic areas.

I teach English, my strongest academic area. Though it may sound like boasting, I really have no serious problems in English. I am a good writer and a voracious reader. I have broad experience, not only in the traditional areas of English classes, but also in journalism, speech, and drama. If there is an area in English where I am weak, it is in spelling, but since I know I sometimes make mistakes, I carefully proofread anything I write and check the dictionary any time I am in doubt. I practice correctly spelling words with which I have difficulty, so this is a minor weakness I am overcoming.

Social studies is another area in which I am strong. I minored in a mixture of them for my B.A. and am certified to teach United States history, world history, economics, sociology, psychology, geography, political science and civics. I hated history in high school because I had teachers who didn’t seem to know or like history themselves; it was always “read the chapter, answer the questions, take a multiple choice test.” In college, I finally met teachers who loved the subject and who told fascinating stories which made history seem like a grand adventure. I began to read independently in the field and tested out of nine hours of U.S. and world history. I also discovered a strength in sociology, political science, and political (not physical) geography. The only social studies with which I had any problems was economics (macro, for those who know the difference), and I am absolutely convinced that economics is as difficult as physics or chemistry.

In the field of science, I finally encountered serious difficulties. I had been in advanced science programs in junior and senior high school, so I thought I was a brilliant science student. In college I learned that I was a good biology/zoology/chemistry student but an abysmal physics student. My freshman year, I actually tested out of five hours of college zoology, but I met my downfall in college physics. In physics I discovered what it felt like to be unable to understand a course. I never knew what I was doing. I could memorize enough formulas to make a "C" or "D" on exams, but I forgot everything that I had memorized the minute the test was over. It made no difference whether I studied five hours a night -- I remained a "know nothing." I did pass the class, earning a "C" by sheer determination and by pestering the professor daily, but I still remember that physics course as the most frustrating experience of my life.

In mathematics, I believe that there are two kinds of thinking -- algebra thinking and geometry thinking -- and never the twain shall meet. In junior high I was also in an advanced mathematics program and took Algebra I in the eighth grade and Algebra II in the ninth. I loved both algebra classes. To give you some idea of the kind of algebra student I was, I liked story problems. Then, in the tenth grade, I took geometry, something completely different. Since I had made an "A" in Algebra II, I thought geometry would be easy. I had confidence, but proofs drove me crazy anyway. I worked so hard for my "A" in geometry that I gave up on advanced mathematics classes. In college when I was required to take mathematics or chemistry or physics, I chose physics (mistakenly thinking it would be easier for me than more mathematics). Perhaps physics requires one of those geometry brains?

Since I have done well academically, I think I have done what is needed to make the best grades possible. Though many subjects come easily to me, I have learned that I can make a "C" in the subjects that are difficult for me if I work hard. I have had to accept the fact that there are areas like physics which will remain a mystery to me no matter how much I study. This frustrating inability to understand a subject has made me more understanding when my students have similar trouble with English.