

The sample essay below comes from Richard in response to the new Common Application essay option #2: "Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?" Be sure to follow the link at the bottom to read a critique of the essay, and also check out these [strategies and tips for essay option #2](#).

Striking Out

I've played baseball ever since I could remember, but somehow, at fourteen, I still wasn't very good at it. You'd think that ten years of summer leagues and two older brothers who'd been the stars of their teams would have rubbed off on me, but you'd be wrong. I mean, I wasn't completely hopeless. I was pretty fast, and I could hit my oldest brother's fastball maybe three or four times out of ten, but I wasn't about to be scouted for college teams.

My team that summer, the Bengals, wasn't anything special, either. We had one or two pretty talented guys, but most, like me, were just barely what you could call decent. But somehow we'd almost scraped through the first round of playoffs, with only one game standing between us and semifinals. Predictably, the game had come down to the last inning, the Bengals had two outs and players on second and third base, and it was my turn at bat. It was like one of those moments you see in movies. The scrawny kid who no one really believed in hits a miraculous home run, winning the big game for his underdog team and becoming a local legend. Except my life wasn't *The Sandlot*, and any hopes my teammates or coach might've had for a last-minute rally to victory were crushed with my third swing-and-miss when the umpire sent me back to the dugout with a "strike three - you're out!"

I was inconsolably angry with myself. I spent the entire car ride home tuning out my parents' words of consolation, replaying my strike-out over and over in my head. For the next few days I was miserable thinking about how, if it hadn't been for me, the Bengals might have been on their way to a league victory, and nothing anyone said could convince me that the loss wasn't on my shoulders.

About a week later, some of my friends from the team got together at the park to hang out. When I arrived, I was a little surprised that no one seemed to be mad at me - after all, I'd lost us the game, and they had to be disappointed about not making it to the semifinals. It wasn't until we split into teams for an impromptu pickup game that I started to realize why no one was upset. Maybe it was the excitement of reaching the playoffs or the pressure of living up to my brothers' examples, but sometime during that game, I'd lost sight of why most of us played summer league baseball. It wasn't to win the championship, as cool as that would have been. It was because we all loved to play. I didn't need a trophy or a Hollywood come-from-behind win to have fun playing baseball with my friends, but maybe I needed to strike out to remember that.

Now read a critique of Richard's essay.

Here I'll discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Richard's essay "Striking Out."

The Focus:

College admissions officers read lots of essays about sports. Indeed, many college applicants seem far more interested in playing sports than they do in getting a college education. In my article on [10 bad essay topics](#), I warn against the hero essay in which the applicant boasts about the winning goal that won the championship game. However impressive the moment may have been, such essays tend to come across as self-absorbed, self-congratulatory, and detached from the actual qualities that make for a good college student.

From the opening sentence, Richard's essay has nothing to do with heroism. Richard is no star athlete, and he has no over-inflated sense of his abilities. **The honesty of the essay is refreshing.** And **the focus of the essay is perfectly on target** for Common Application option #2 ("Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?"). The essay presents a **clear moment of failure**, and **Richard clearly learned a significant lesson** from the experience. Richard has taken what could be a clichéd topic -- the athlete at bat in a position to win the important game -- and turns the topic on its head. The admissions folks will enjoy the novelty of the approach.

The Tone:

I love the tone of Richard's essay. It's self-deprecating, wonderfully honest, and a bit humorous. At the same time, there's an underlying confidence to the essay. Sure, Richard isn't the world's best baseball player, but he is perfectly aware of this fact and is comfortable with it. He knows who he is and who he isn't. He obviously isn't boasting about his athletic skills, but he is managing to show off his self-confidence and his writing skills.

The Title: "Striking Out" isn't an overly clever title, but it gets the job done well. We immediately know that this will be an essay about both failure and baseball, and the idea of a dramatic strike-out sparks reader interest and makes us want to continue with the essay. You can check out these [tips for titles](#), and I'd say Richard's title succeeds in focusing the essay and sparking reader interest.

The Writing: We're quickly invited into Richard's essay with informal phrases such as "I mean" and "you'd think." The language is conversational and friendly. We are immediately introduced to a speaker who doesn't quite measure up to his brothers and isn't going to impress anyone with his athletic prowess. Richard seems human, someone we can relate to.

At the same time, the language of the essay is tight and engaging. Every sentence says something, and Richard uses economical language to clearly convey the setting and situation. The college admissions folks are likely to respond positively to the clear "voice" of the essay, the humble self-deprecating humor, and the strong writing ability of the author.

The Audience: Richard's essay would not be appropriate in all situations. If he were applying to colleges where he is hoping to play on a competitive varsity team, this would be the wrong essay. This is not an essay that will impress an NCAA coach scouting out the winning team for the upcoming academic year. But if Richard is trying to impress his audience with his personality more than his baseball skills, he has done an excellent job. A college looking for a mature, self-aware applicant with a pleasing personality will be impressed by Richard's essay. And his love of baseball will be attractive to schools with intramural, club, or less competitive intercollegiate baseball teams.

A Final Word: Always keep in mind the purpose of the application essay. The college admissions folks want to get to know you as a person. Along with [grades](#) and test scores, they will be using more subjective and [holistic](#) information as they make their decision about whether to admit a student or not. Richard succeeds in making a good impression. He is a strong writer; his essay has an engaging voice; he seems mature and self-aware; and most important of all, he seems like the type of student who would be a positive addition to the campus community.