

- This is our review on a former student's draft. This student gave us explicit permission to share their work and we have edited key details for privacy.
- This student was admitted to Columbia, Rice, UC Berkeley, UCLA, Northwestern, and all target/safety schools.
- Note that we will NEVER share your writing or edits publicly.

The rhythmic pounding of the waves on the shore blends with my footfalls on the tan sand. As I run along the beach, my eyes spot a telltale shimmer. A piece of plastic, floating in the wind. I sigh internally, for the third time that week.

I'm on the varsity cross country team at school and go on these types of runs often. I enjoy the challenge of running on all types of terrain, but as I've seen more of the nature around me, I've become increasingly aware of the human impact on these spaces.

It started three years ago during a typical training run. As I jogged near the coast, I was shocked by the amount of litter I saw. Discarded water bottles, straws, and wet cardboard lined the gutters. The ocean itself was beautiful, but just blocks away, the litter marred the beauty. How could I appreciate the vibrant orange-and-pink sunsets or the foaming break of the waves while running if I was distracted by the trash on the sidewalk? I watch my little brother surf on weekends, and I even became worried that he would encounter some large piece of litter while close to shore.

One day, in AP Environmental Science, my teacher showed us pictures of a turtle caught in a plastic can-holder. I was reminded of the litter near the shore again. If it happened to get close to the water, who knows what would happen? The wildlife near my favorite beach would be threatened, and that thought alone was enough for me to make a change.

I realized that in order to keep nature beautiful, I needed to do my part. My parents suggested that I start carrying a small trash bag on my runs, picking up litter as I went. Soon, I asked my teammate Annemarie to join me, and together we'd go on runs, cleaning up the coastline as we did.

As fun as these cleanups were, I felt like we needed to be doing more. There's only so much trash that two runners can pick up. That's when I filled out the paperwork to start the _____ High Environmental Conservation Club.

Our club's mission consists of two parts: educating others, and taking action on real environmental challenges. We host speakers and watch documentaries at meetings to raise awareness about environmental issues. But beyond that, we also take real action. We organized a trash pickup at our local beach and lobbied our school district to change the signs on our recycling bins to make them easier to read. Twelve club members showed up to the trash pickup and we collected ten bags of trash total! It was mind-blowing how much we could do

together. And with the lobbying, we eventually succeeded in convincing the school district of our goal, changing the signs of every single recycling bin at our school (over 50!).

Founding this club has taught me valuable lessons about leadership. In cross country, my coach always tells me to “embrace the burn”, to accept that my aching muscles are necessary steps for improvement. I felt the burn when the school district didn’t accept our recycling proposal the first time. I felt it again when we had to reschedule our trash pickup because it was raining. But I’ve learned that progress can be slow and setbacks are inevitable, but the key is to keep moving forward, putting one foot in front of another.

In college, I want to major in Environmental Engineering and work on solving the problem of litter on an even larger scale. This is the mission that gets me up in the morning. What started as a simple observation on one of my runs ended up fueling my passion for protecting the environment, and I’m excited to keep making the Earth more beautiful than it is today.

General comments

This is a strong start for your Common App essay! Your essay structure of *cross country -> noticing litter -> environmental club -> applying cross country lessons to the club* flows well and conveys a strong growth narrative. As you probably know, athletics are a bit of a clichéd topic, but the connection to your environmental club is well done and makes for a memorable narrative. Most of my comments serve to deepen the discussion you have around your interest in the environment — it’s clear you care deeply about nature and focusing on your relationship to it will really make your essay stand out.

In the inline edits above, I made some prose edits for clarity and suggested you remove some of the redundant details in the beginning/middle of your essay. This will free up space to deepen your theme discussion.

Right now, I can identify a clear theme of **determination/resilience** and a hint of **man vs. nature**. I would suggest you expand upon your discussion of **man vs. nature**, as it’s an advanced theme that deserves more space. Right now, you explore it mainly through your description of places marred by litter, pitting humans against nature. But when you run, aren’t you impacting nature as well, leaving your footprints in the sand, your breath in the air, etc? Of course you’re not littering, but it’s inevitable that you still leave a trace in some way.

Instead of pitting humans against nature, you could take this essay to the next level by explaining that you’re not separate from nature yourself — rather, you’re part of it and responsible for coexisting within it. You could explore **the tension between enjoying and preserving nature** — because you love going out and exploring nature, you’re leaving a trace of yourself wherever you go, **but** you’re simultaneously focused on preserving it for other

humans, animals, and ecosystems. This self-reflection elevates your essay and shows the admissions committee that you're able to think about your own complex role in nature.

Your conclusion should reflect upon the relationship between yourself and the natural world and also tie back to cross country. You could try something like this:

When I run, I'm not just passing through nature; I'm part of it. I feel the earth beneath my feet, (insert sensory descriptions, elaborate on the traces you're leaving). This connection fuels my desire to protect these spaces for (who?)...

Great work! I thoroughly enjoyed learning about your interest in running and the connection with your interest in protecting the environment. This essay already contains all the elements needed to form a strong essay and it will stand out even more with these revisions. Best of luck on your next draft!

Rubric

See [our rubric](#) to interpret your scores.

1. Admissions-ready narrative: 32/40
2. Hook and conclusion: 14/20
3. Organization and structure: 18/20
4. Voice and prose: 17/20

Total: 81/100