

# Finding My Voice

[This is a real admissions essay by “Jerry,” from the Johns Hopkins website. They have a good archive of essays that can help you think about the form of the essay, if you find models helpful: <https://apply.jhu.edu/application-process/essays-that-worked/> ]

I looked up and flinched slightly. There were at least sixty of them, far more than expected. I had thirty weeks to teach them the basics of public speaking. Gritting my teeth, I split my small group of tutors among the crowd and sat down for an impromptu workshop with the eighth graders. They were inexperienced, monotone, and quiet. In other words, they reminded me of myself...

I was born with a speech impediment that weakened my mouth muscles. My speech was garbled and incomprehensible. Understandably, I grew up quiet. I tried my best to blend in and give the impression I was silent by choice. I joined no clubs in primary school, instead preferring isolation. It took six years of tongue twisters and complicated mouth contortions in special education classes for me to produce the forty-four sounds of the English language.

Then, high school came. I was sick of how confining my quiet nature had become. For better or for worse, I decided to finally make my voice heard.

Scanning the school club packet, I searched for my place. Most activities just didn't feel right. But then, I sat in on a debate team practice and was instantly hooked. I was captivated by how confidently the debaters spoke and how easily they commanded attention. I knew that this was the path forward.

Of course, this was all easier said than done. Whenever it was my turn to debate, I found that I was more of a deer in the headlights than a person enjoying the spotlight. My start was difficult, and I stuttered more than I spoke in those first few weeks. Nonetheless, I began using the same tools as I did when I learned to speak all those years ago: practice and time. I watched the upperclassmen carefully, trying to speak as powerfully as they did. I learned from my opponents and adapted my style through the hundreds of rounds I lost. With discipline, I drilled, repeating a single speech dozens of times until I got it right.

Day by day, I began to stand a little taller and talk a little louder both inside and outside of debate. In a few months, my blood no longer froze when I was called on in class. I found I could finally look other people in the eyes when I talked to them without feeling embarrassed. My posture straightened and I stopped fidgeting around strangers. I began to voice my opinions as opposed to keeping my ideas to myself. As my debate rank increased from the triple to single-digits, so too did my standing at school. I began interacting with my teachers more and leading my peers in clubs. In discussions, I put forward my ideas with every bit as much conviction as my classmates. When seniors began to ask me for advice and teachers recruited me to teach underclassmen, I discovered not only that I had been heard, but that others wanted to listen. At heart, I am still reserved (some things never change), but in finding my voice, I found a strength I could only dream of when I stood in silence so many years ago.

Standing in front of the crowd of students, it was my hope that by founding this program, I could give them an experience that was as empowering as mine had been for me. As the weeks passed, the students inched past their insecurities and towards finding their voices, just as I had always wanted to do. On the last day of class for that year, I looked up and saw each of the students standing confidently, equipped and ready to speak their minds in whatever they wanted to do. They had come a long way from being the shy and stuttering novices that they were just thirty weeks before—I can't wait to see how far they can go from here.

# Facing the Hot Griddle

[Another essay from the same website, by “Rocio.” Another example of how you can work a narrative hook through an essay—here she uses the hook as a kind of metaphor for her life.]

Standing in front of the kitchen counter, my small hands are placed on the cool granite top and my eyes rest on the empty bowl set out in front of me. On one side lies a pack of masa harina and on the other, a pitcher filled with water. Tortillas are considered to be somewhat of a staple food in Guatemala and in Central American cuisines. Whenever my mom asks me to make tortillas, I groan internally; not because I dislike tortillas, but because I simply cannot make them. What should come naturally as a Guatemalan native is foreign to my small hands. My hands are unable to form the perfectly sized circles because they are trying to decide what dominates more—my Guatemalan roots or the American culture I grew up in.

Minutes pass and I have done absolutely nothing. Finally, I extend my hesitant arm to pick up the pack of masa harina and proceed to pour it into the bowl. As I pour the masa harina, I cannot help but think about how much it resembles my journey to America. When I moved, I brought my Guatemalan heritage with me into the massive bowl that is the United States. Continuing with the recipe, I gradually add water to the masa harina and knead it until it becomes the desired texture. Assimilating into American culture and the American way of life was no easy feat for me and I struggled at first, but I found ways to manage. Although my parents were not fluent in English, I was able to learn English with the help of Dora the Explorer, Barney, and my surroundings. Little by little, American culture poured into my life, intermingling with my Guatemalan roots.

My next step is to grab a small amount of masa in my hands and begin to roll it into as much of a perfectly shaped sphere as I can. Flattening the ball of masa between my hands, I begin to shape it into a tortilla. Similar to how I have a preconceived notion of how I want the tortilla to turn out, I tend to idealize how I want my life to turn out. Regardless of my efforts, I can't help it if my tortilla tears as I attempt to shape it. Just like the cracks and tears in my tortilla, I face obstacles in life. However, I have learned to not let them bring me down or keep me from continuing to try. For instance, I come from a low socioeconomic background, but I have never let that stop me from pursuing my aspirations. It is not just about the tortilla that I am making right in front of me. It is about me, my life, and what kind of tortilla I will end up being. Will I be a tortilla that looks like every other one? Or will I be a tortilla, uniquely made in the most perfect imperfect shape?

Despite my many failed attempts at making tortillas throughout my life, I have discovered the key ingredient to the tortilla recipe, and ultimately the recipe of life: persistence. If trying to make tortillas has taught me anything, it is that: it's not about the shape of the tortilla, it's about how the tortilla faces the hot griddle of life.