Overall Comments

Opening Remarks

The good news is that you have a great story to tell. If harnessed properly and structured correctly, the content you presented in this first draft will be very impressive to admissions officers. The bad news is that while your essay reads nicely and would seem like great writing to the average reader, it is actually missing several key elements that admissions officers always look for. Missing these differences can make the difference between acceptance and outright rejection. To make your essay solid, you’ll need to rewrite most of it. Fear not—the following comments will guide you through every step you need to take to make your essay powerful and effective.

Overall Comments

• Your essay could be most improved by sharply decreasing the amount of storytelling that it contains, and sharply increasing the amount of introspection. You only have about 120 words dedicated to introspection in your final paragraph, which means only about 18% of your essay is dedicated to introspection. A good college essay is composed of at least 60% introspection, or a discussion of what your anecdotal evidence shows about you as a person, and how your story affected you/what you learned from it. Apart from answering the prompt given on the Common App, you should also strive to craft your response such that it strongly implies that you would be a great candidate for the upcoming class. You should tell your story in no more than 260 words, quickly tell the reader what your failure was, and spend the rest of the essay discussing what you learned, and why what you learned makes you a great candidate.

• Your essay is also quite wordy. I make a few rewording suggestions in the red mark ups, but as you rewrite your essay keep concision in mind. Never say in fifteen words what you can say in ten. A lot of precious space is also currently taken up by unnecessary analogies (e.g. the wildebeest and lion analogies) that should be filled instead by introspection. The use of literary devices (e.g. metaphors, allegories, symbolism) in college essays generally increases the essay’s length without adding substance. Any credit you may get from your reader for being a quirky writer is not worth the space you have to give up that could otherwise be used to include more introspection.

• Your conclusion’s tone is a bit negative and questionable for a college essay. While admissions officers will definitely appreciate your passion for success and your ambition, the diction in your conclusion also suggests that you have a strong emotional reaction against failure, and that you allow bitter feelings about failure to linger for a long time. Even if this is true, it may not be good to let admissions officers know this in case any of them decide that it is risky to accept someone with such fear of and disdain for failure.

Structure - Intro

• Always remember that the primary goal of your essay is to answer the prompt, which your introduction is supposed to initiate. Currently, your introduction does nothing but begin telling a story. You should structure your thesis with a relevant hook, and short summary of your story, a thesis statement previewing what you learned, and what you will discuss in the rest of the essay (in that order). The following is a suggested essay structure for use as a skeleton for your revised essay.

  (1) A gripping hook. While your current hook does a good job of piquing the reader’s attention, your essay also needs to tell your story more succinctly. Your introduction would be much more informative and succinct if your hook were rewritten to one or two sentences that briefly describe the failure that your essay is written about.

  Example hook: “After three years of intense training, I staggered off the track at the D1 3200 meter state championships covered in sweat and tears. My poor performance had cost my team the victory by only a few points.”

  (2) Basic background information on your commitment to distance running, and how failing at the state championships affected you. Write about thoughts and feelings that genuinely impacted you at the time. The more authentic your writing, the more it will shine through in your words and make your introduction stronger. This should be done in two or three solid, informative sentences.

  (3) Transition to your thesis. Example transition: “Nevertheless, failure taught me lessons that I continue to apply towards reaching my goals.”

Structure - Thesis

• Your thesis statement is nonexistent. A thesis statement should directly address the prompt, then introduce key points to be discussed in separate body paragraphs throughout the rest of your essay.

• Here is what a thesis could look like: “My failure at the state championship taught me that hard work does not entitle one to success, that each member of a team is crucial to the team’s success, and that the disappointment of failure can be a driving force towards success.”

Structure - Paragraph

• All of your paragraphs (except the last one) combine to form nothing but a story. Generally, your essays should be made up of a series of body paragraphs, each of which discuss a portion of your response to the prompt. In this case, each of your body paragraphs should be structured by an introductory sentence that states one of the things that you learned or how failure affected you, followed by elaboration. The following are outlines for paragraphs based on the example thesis given in the Thesis section of my comments.

  (1) Introductory sentence stating the key point from your thesis to be discussed in the paragraph (Example intro sentence: “I now realize that working hard provides no guarantee of success.”)

  (2) Three sentences of introspection (Example introspection sentence: “I now work hard on the things I love for the sake of self-fulfillment and improvement, knowing that it is presumptuous to expect success every time I work hard.”)

Structure - Paragraph 2

  (1) Introductory sentence stating the key point from your thesis to be discussed in the paragraph (Example intro sentence: “I have also learned that often a team is as strong as its weakest member.”)

  (2) Three sentences of introspection (Example introspection sentence: “In every team that I have joined since failing my teammates at the state championship, I have made myself an active, involved asset to each of my teammates.” Make sure to provide evidence for a statement like this if you decide to include one.)

Structure - Paragraph 3

  (1) Introductory sentence stating the key point from your thesis to be discussed in the paragraph (Example intro sentence: “In a practical sense, I have learned how powerful failure can be in pushing someone to success.”)

  (2) Three sentences of introspection (Example introspection sentence: “I now see every failure as a lesson on what not to do, and an opportunity to try again with greater skill and fervor.” Make sure to provide evidence for a statement like this if you decide to include one.)

Structure - Conclusion

• Your conclusion is not really a conclusion at all, but more of a thesis since it introduces your response to the prompt for the first time. Once you write a conclusion, it should be structured so that it briefly rehashes the points you made in your thesis with a slightly different twist based on what the reader now knows, with some sort of statement at the end that states the implications of what you learned on your future. For other strategies for ending a conclusion, see our article titled “The Conclusion” on our writing center.

• Conclusions in college admissions essays are generally much shorter than body paragraphs, since they are not supposed to introduce new information and are therefore not worth making very long. The following is an outline of a strong conclusion based on the example thesis introduced in the Thesis section of the comments.
Nice hook!

Last year, I awoke from troubled sleep at 5:00 AM to the feeling of adrenaline pumping through my veins. The house was quiet, and I was warm and safe under my covers. Instead of waking up to an intruder or any real danger, I had woken up

This is a bit of a subtlety, but using "most important" in this sentence could suggest to readers that you prioritize athletics above all else, which is potentially risky. Consider rewording this to convey that winning state was the most high-stakes task of your high school career, as opposed to the most important.

...to face the most important task of my high school career: winning the D1 3200 meter track and field state championships. Throughout my high school I was known for being a distance running stallion. Though I had always been an excellent student, I was known throughout my high school as a distance running stallion. I would have to leave the warmth and safety of the covers and exert my body harder than I ever had before.

My four teammates and I

This word isn't needed. Your reader will not care that you may have stepped on the line at 9:55 AM or 10:05 AM as opposed to exactly 10:00 AM.

Me and my four teammates stepped onto the starting line at approximately 10:00 AM. As we shook out our legs, half in preparation, half out of nervousness, we all knew that if any one of us raced poorly, it would cost us the trophy and undermine years of preparation.

"Everyone on the line," announced the starter

The starter announced "everyone on the line" robotically. I assumed the starting position as my season flashed before my eyes. The dim pain of an old foot

While analogies are fun to read, they are an ineffective way to strengthen college essays. Any slight
injury tugged at my confidence, and I was a panicked wildebeest on the verge of stampede. "Runners set." The powerful muscles in my seasoned legs quivered eagerly, and I was a lion ready to chase down the wildebeest before him.

Onomatopoeia is also unnecessary in formal writing, but because this one is only one word long, it doesn't damage your essay as much.

"Bang!"

As my team and I fought for a position in the first lane against the mob of competition, I felt my confidence growing. I was running fast, and gaining ground effortlessly. I found myself in second place before the first lap was over, with my teammates hot on my heels. We maintained this position through the fourth lap, and I felt strong enough to easily run the next half of the race. Goosebumps ran down my spine in anticipation of imminent success.

With two laps left, every runner started to push the pace. The leader, who had kept his lead throughout the entire race, suddenly burst into action and began to leave me behind. Surprised and overwhelmed, I struggled to keep up, but my heart was already beating at full capacity. Someone else running close behind me, who had until then been only a shadow cast in front of me by the sun, overtook me halfway through the second lap. To my alarm, he was on the same team as the leader. If he and the leader won first and second place, I knew that my team's chances of victory would be all but gone. And yet, my legs would not allow me to move faster.

Another runner passed me, this time one of my teammates. "Go!" he gasped desperately as he approached a dead sprint going into the final lap. Runners continued to pass me as I entered the final 400 meters. After a blur of pain and chaos, I collapsed through the finish line, my face completely drenched with sweat and tears. As I hobbled off the track, I could tell by the somber look on the face of my coach that we'd missed the win by only a few points.

Up until that day, I had dreaded the idea of failing my team at the state championship. On that day, I failed. On that day, I learned of how much I truly hate losing. Despite all of my training, it was my egregious weakness and inability to...
hold my place in the race that cost my team the victory. I learned that aside from just desiring success, it is also useful to fear failure. The motivation that falling short at the state championships awoke in me drove me to become team captain as a senior, and to train even harder. One year later, with the bitter taste of failure still on my tongue, I led my team to victory at the state championships.

The phrase "fear failure" may hint at insecurities. This is a great sentence that shows how you turned your failure into a driving force for success. This is exactly the type of result that admissions officers love seeing as a response to this prompt.