Sample Essay for ENG 121

The Other Pay-offs of Biking

I’d never been what one might call an athletic person. My folks let me give youth football a try when I was maybe 13, but it wasn’t anything that really stuck. Besides, I had been feeling moderately healthy since I changed my eating habits, going to strict vegetarianism, and losing a substantial amount of weight a few years ago. But at a visit to my doctor one day, he looked at the blood test results, and told me that my cholesterol had gotten pretty high; I wasn’t at a dangerous level, but my doctor gave me two options: take a pill or start exercising at least 30 minutes per day, 5 days per week. I decided to go with the latter option, and resolved to get on my bicycle every day. It took me a while to realize it, but in addition to improved health, there were a number of other benefits that I discovered.

Thinking about where to start was a bit intimidating. There are people who have really expensive bikes, made from super-light alloy metals, and special shoes that clip in to costly pedals, and really tightly designed outfits they wear while they ride all over the place; it seemed like a level of dedication I wasn’t sure I could afford. But that doesn’t mean I was out of luck. I’d purchased a low-end dark grey city commuter bike a year or two before, mostly to get from my apartment to a place to eat in my neighborhood, or to events like a festival in the park or a street fair. I live in a city with some serious parking shortages, and the bike was to avoid having to circle block after block in my car, or have to shell out $5 for parking, or even more for a cab or ride share (the bus fits my economy, but doesn’t run as often as I need it). I just wanted to casually ride up to my location, lock up, and go have fun. It’s also a city with some serious hills, and my city bike had a pretty versatile combination of three gears in the front, and seven on the back cassette. It isn’t the kind of road racer major enthusiasts ride, but my little Raleigh bike seemed like a great bike to start off with. But getting started required some preparation beyond the bicycle.

Because the doctor told me that I had to get my heart-rate up (and keep it up) for a certain amount of time, it seemed reasonable to measure just how fast or slow I was riding. I plotted out a route going about 8 blocks east in my neighborhood, looping south, then back west, coming back down a different stretch of road, which took me about 7 minutes so I thought that If I did that 4 times I’d be giving my body what it needs. But I quickly discovered that doing the same route 4 times in a row can get terribly boring, so I had to change it up. I started experimenting, and found a really good route, going through my neighborhood twice, taking slightly different roads in each loop. Not only does it keep me pedaling for at least 30 minutes, but I discovered that when biking around these streets and avenues, I got to know my neighborhood better.

As I got out on my bike for the daily ride, I started seeing people from my community, like the guy who owns a television repair place on Adams Ave., and an old coworker who also happens to jog every morning around the same time. On one morning, I saw an older woman take a spill on the sidewalk, and stopped to help her up and make sure her Chihuahua didn’t run off; the next time I saw her walking, she flagged me down and gave me a thank you card, and told me she owns our local music shop, and welcomed me in to get a few records. On any given morning, there are so many different people I run into—the group walking their retrievers, the woman in curlers with coffee and the paper on her Spanish style porch, the pair of scooter riders putting down 35th side by side on a schedule I can set my watch by, and the monks who live on the cliff and toll a bell at 6 and 7am, then shuffle out through the blocks of craftsman style homes under the banana and palm trees. I later learned (from a report by Roxana Popescu) that my neighborhood is unusual in that it has racial and ethnic demographics that reflect the whole city, and it’s really interesting I’m part of that microcosm of diversity.

Not only was I getting to know some of the people in my neighborhood a bit better, but on these rides I also started to learn more about the structure of my city, and some areas of destruction. Each road where my tires spun taught which streets were smoother, and which ones really need repair. According to a study done by researchers at the University of British Columbia, “trips by bicycle face higher risk of fatality and injury per trip and per distance travelled than trips by car,” so I was concerned about the conditions of the roads I was using to ride (Teschke, Reynolds, Ries, Gouge & Winters, 2012, p. 7). Reading about those risks (and also benefits in the article) helped me think more deeply about road safety concerns. After I’d been riding for a few months, I got to speak to my City Council member at an event he was having at a local coffee shop. When he asked what I’d like to see in the neighborhood, I told him that we need some new roads, and was able to mention specific blocks that were exceptionally bad. He gave me the number for his office and told me about the phone app the city has, and since then I’ve reported broken water pipes, leaking gas lines, garbage cans that have been knocked over, and graffiti on some of our wonderful murals. When people say, “Somebody should do something about this,” I think that maybe those somebodies are the people who are out and about, and paying attention, and trying to make things better. My daily exercise makes me that somebody!

Another thing I noticed about my neighborhood was all the efforts to build community. During my ride I passed signs, banners, and marquees that gave notice about neighborhood sports teams at the Rec Center, movies in the park every weekend in the summer, and public meetings about things like businesses, the school board, and other city groups. Biking around and seeing these things, I became aware of ways I can get involved in my local community. Though I normally bike as the sun is rising at dawn, sometimes I head out in the evening for a Community Planning Group meeting, or to a gathering of one of the local cycling/environmental groups, who are thinking about how biking is a major part of my city’s Climate Action Plan, with a mission that includes, “Promoting active transportation,” which I’m dedicated to as well (City of San Diego, 2015, p. 4).

Another benefit I discovered from biking was that it brought me closer to my family. When I first began, I’d get out of bed around 6:30, and whisper to my partner that I was going for a ride. But after a few months, they decided that they wanted to go too, and we started biking together. It’s difficult to have a conversation while biking with someone, as we didn’t want to ride side by side because of fears that cars might not share the road. Still, even though we couldn’t speak to each other, just sharing the experience of being out and active early in the morning made the time together special; it’s like we have a date every morning, but instead of some fancy restaurant, we have the whole town!

My biking habit also really impressed my father in-law, who once biked from Long Beach all the way up to Santa Barbara on a folding bike (which has really small wheels compared to a regular road bicycle). Sharing a hobby gave us a common ground. When we spend time together now, we usually compare rides, and every so often, we sign up for a long bike ride together. Just a few months ago, we did the Bike the Bay event, where almost four thousand riders signed up and biked from the San Diego Convention Center, over the Coronado Bridge, through Coronado, down the Silver Strand, to Imperial Beach, then back up along the east side of the San Diego Bay. While he and I were out, my mother in-law and partner hung out, and prepared a little picnic we all enjoyed together when we got home. Sometimes it can be difficult to connect with people in the family from the older generations, but this biking routine has really helped build these relationships.

Biking has also helped me exchange some of my old negative habits to more positive ones. For example, I really get sucked into video games, and it’s difficult to do the exercise my doctor recommends with a controller in my hand. I think about how when we play games, and do something in the digital world, we might get a “trophy” or an “achievement,” and how that feels good. In a study about these kinds of motivations, Kwon, Halavais, and Havener (2015) write, “Badges have traditionally been used by various institutions to recognize and incentivize performance, providing a marker of accomplishment visible to the community and to the wider public” (p. 93). This made sense to me! I loved it when I’d get a badge in a game, so I figured, Why not try that with biking? I was able to download an app on my phone (there are a whole bunch of them), that tracks my biking speed, route, and could track my heart beat if I wore some kind of monitor. When I ride faster than usual, or farther than normal, or for a longer amount of time, I get a little trophy that appears on my phone. Though the article talks about public acknowledgement, I don’t share the results of my ride with the public, but just the private knowledge motivates me to keep riding, and trying to beat myself in this new game I associate with my bike ride. I even hide it from myself, keeping the phone in my pocket until the ride is over; I’d hate to get distracted while I’m riding, after all.

That leads to one more benefit that seems really important: in the 30 to 45 minutes I’m biking every morning, I’m getting valuable time to myself. In that time, I’m thinking about how my body feels while I’m riding, and looking around my neighborhood, but I’m also mentally preparing for my day. I’m talking myself through problems I’m trying to solve, conflicts I experience in my daily life, and plans I know I have to sit down and make later. The quiet time on my bike, and the motion through the cool morning air goes a long way to prepare me for the long day ahead. In the 18 months or so I’ve been doing this, I’ve been more productive at work, more awake during the day, and I find the food I eat is often healthier too, and I don’t want huge meals or heavy drinks at night, because I want to be able to wake up in the morning and ride.

It hasn’t taken much to become a “cyclist.” I didn’t need a bunch of fancy gear and an expensive bike. With a simple 10 speed bike, an old t-shirt, shorts, and sneakers, I’ve discovered so much. Not only have I been able to get my body a bit healthier, I’ve also been able to get more involved in my community, get closer to my family, and find new little ways to enjoy the day, and to face the challenges of life with a clearer mind. After about a year and a half of being on the bike every morning, I’m even starting to wonder: could I make the ride up to Santa Barbara? Maybe with a little more pedaling, I can start to expand out the neighborhood, eventually.

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