

The college rejection letter

By [David Nyhan](#)

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Former Globe columnist the late David Nyhan wrote the following column in 1987. Since then, it has been reprinted in the newspaper and online many times around this time of year. Nyhan died in January 2005.

THE REJECTIONS arrive this time of year in thin, cheap envelopes, some with a crummy window for name and address, as if it were a bill, and none with the thick packet you'd hoped for.

"Dear So-and-so:

"The admissions committee gave full consideration . . . but I regret to inform you we will be unable to offer you a place in the Class of 2012." Lots of applicants, limited number of spaces, blah blah blah, good luck with your undergraduate career. Very truly yours, Assistant Dean Blowhard, rejection writer, Old Overshoe U.

This is the season of college acceptance letters. So it's also the time of rejection. You're in or you're out. Today is the day you learn how life is not like high school. To the Ins, who got where they wanted to go: Congrats, great, good luck, have a nice life, see you later. The rest of this is for the Outs.

You sort of felt it was coming. Your SAT scores weren't the greatest. Your transcript had some holes in it. You wondered what your teachers' recommendations would really say, or imply. And you can't help thinking about that essay you finished at 2 o'clock in the morning of the

day you absolutely had to mail in your application, that essay which was, well, a little weird.

Maybe you could have pulled that C in sociology up to a B-minus. Maybe you shouldn't have quit soccer to get a job to pay for your gas. Maybe it was that down period during sophomore year when you had mono and didn't talk to your teachers for three months while you vegged out. What difference does it make what it was? It still hurts.

It hurts where you feel pain most: inside. It's not like the usual heartache that kids have, the kind other people can't see. An alcoholic parent, a secret shame, a gaping wound in the family fabric, these are things one can carry to school and mask with a grin, a wisecrack, a scowl, a just-don't-mess-with-me-today attitude.

But everybody knows where you got in and where you didn't. Sure, the letter comes to the house. But eventually you've still got to face your friends. "Any mail for me?" is like asking for a knuckle sandwich. Thanks a lot for the kick in the teeth. What a bummer.

How do you tell kids at school? That's the hard part. The squeals in the corridor from the kids who got in someplace desirable. The supercilious puss on the ones who got early acceptance or the girl whose old man has an in at Old Ivy.

There's the class doofus who suddenly becomes the first nerd accepted at Princeton, the 125-pound wrestling jock who, surprise, surprise, got into MIT. But what about you?

You've heard about special treatment for this category or that category, alumni kids on a legacy ticket or affirmative action luckouts or rebounders or oboe players. Maybe they were trying to fill certain slots. But you're not a slot. You're you. They can look at your grades and weigh your scores and see how many years you were in French Club.

But they can't look into your head, or into your heart. They can't check out the guts department.

This is the important thing: They didn't reject you. They rejected your resume. They gave some other kid the benefit of the doubt. Maybe that kid deserved a break. Don't you deserve a break? Sure. You'll get one. Maybe this is the reality check you needed. Maybe the school that does take you will be good. Maybe this is the day you start to grow up.

Look at some people who've accomplished a lot and see where they started. Ronald Reagan? Eureka College. Jesse Jackson? They wouldn't let him play quarterback in the Big Ten, so he quit Illinois for North Carolina A & T. Do you know that the recently retired chairmen and CEOs of both General Motors and General Electric graduated from UMass? Bob Dole? He went to Washburn Municipal University.

The former minority leader of the United States Senate, Tom Daschle, went to South Dakota State. The former speaker of the US House of Representatives, J. Dennis Hastert, went to Northern Illinois University. Dick Arney, the former House majority leader, took a bachelor's degree from Jamestown College. Winston Churchill? He was so slow a learner that they used to write to his mother to come take this boy off our hands.

I know what you think: Spare me the sympathy. It still hurts. But let's keep this in perspective. What did Magic Johnson say to the little boy who also tested HIV positive? "You've got to have a positive attitude." What happens when you don't keep a positive attitude? Don't ask.

This college thing? What happened is that you rubbed up against the reality of big-time, maybe big-name, institutions. Some they pick, some they don't. You lost. It'll happen again, but let's hope it won't have the awful kick. You'll get tossed by a girlfriend or boyfriend. You won't get the job or the promotion you think you deserve. Some disease may pluck

you from life's fast lane and pin you to a bed, a wheelchair, a coffin. That happens.

Bad habits you can change; bad luck is nothing you can do anything about.

Does it mean you're not a good person? People like you, if not your resume. There's no one else that can be you. Plenty of people think you're special now, or will think that, once they get to know you. Because you are.

And the admissions department that said no? Screw them. You've got a life to lead.■

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