
Writing Assignment Two: Personal Narrative Essay

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Introduction

I did not start out knowing that cybersecurity was for me. Instead, I found my career path through my love of video games and computers, even though for most of middle school and high school, I was convinced that I would become a veterinarian because I loved animals. In junior year of high school, however, I discovered something I had not fully considered before: becoming a veterinarian also meant working with reptiles. At that point, I completely abandoned what I thought would be my future career path and began to question what direction I would take instead. By the time I graduated in 2016, I still did not have a plan for what I wanted to study or even a clear decision about college.

Early Interests and Career Discovery

My direction in life changed when I was selected to attend Tidewater Community College's Summer Bridge program in Portsmouth, Virginia. The program let me explore my interests in a practical way as I transitioned into adulthood. During that time, I realized my passion for electronics, especially video games and computers, could become a career. The realization was gradual, but it gave me the direction I needed and helped me see technology as a future worth pursuing.

After the Summer Bridge program, I did not start at Tidewater Community College immediately in the fall of 2016. Instead, I took a gap year, moved out of state, and worked while gaining a new sense of independence. That period was important because it allowed me to mature and better understand what I wanted for my future. When I returned to Virginia nine months later, I began working for OfficeMax, a retail office supply store in Suffolk, Virginia. That job became the place where my love for electronics truly blossomed.

At OfficeMax, I worked as a computer technician, selling laptops and desktops and managing computer work orders. This role gave me hands-on experience that strengthened my technical interests in a way I had never experienced before. I was responsible for disassembling and installing computer components, diagnosing system failures, applying updates and patches, and handling file transfers. Each of these tasks made me more confident in my ability to understand technology beyond the surface level. More importantly, I began to see that I enjoyed solving technical problems and working with computers in a practical environment.

By spring 2018, I felt ready to return to school and pursue a degree in computers. When I met with my advisor, she explained the differences between a computer science degree and a cybersecurity degree. Cybersecurity was still a relatively new program at the college, and I was drawn to how advanced the field was as well as the different career paths it could lead to, such as penetration testing and systems analysis. That conversation helped me make a decision that would shape the rest of my academic and professional journey. From that point on, I declared my major as Cybersecurity.

Leadership and Growth at Tidewater Community College

While attending Tidewater Community College, I did not only focus on cybersecurity coursework. I also worked on building my leadership skills by challenging myself to step into roles that pushed me outside my comfort zone. I became a Student Ambassador and later Student Government President, which gave me the opportunity to work alongside faculty members and students while speaking to others about campus engagement. In those roles, I shared my own student experiences, served as a liaison, and represented the student body. These experiences taught me to communicate effectively, lead discussions, and advocate for others' interests.

What I did not realize at the time was that these same skills would later transfer into my current role as a Sales Manager for Hilton Hotels. In that position, I lead meetings, present new ideas for company strategy and revenue growth, and guide clients through different options to help make their events successful. Looking back, I can see that the leadership skills I developed at TCC did not stay in the classroom or student government. They became part of my professional identity and continue to shape how I work with people today.

The courses I took at TCC also strengthened my technical foundation. Classes such as Network and Infrastructure, Cybersecurity Core and Defense, Cyber Policy, and Programming gave me a wide range of hands-on experiences. Network and Infrastructure taught me how to set up firewalls, build computers, and work within directories. Cybersecurity Core and Defense helped me learn how to think like a hacker and explore weaknesses using Linux. Cyber Policy taught me to consider the legal aspects of investigations, policy violations, and risk management. Programming helped me understand logical structures, design techniques, and different ways to automate security tasks for network monitoring.

These courses challenged me in different ways, but they also helped me realize that cybersecurity was broader and more complex than I had first imagined. Each class built on the others and helped me understand that the field required both technical skills and critical thinking. I began to appreciate that cybersecurity was not only about tools and systems, but also about judgment, analysis, and responsibility. That combination made the major feel meaningful and worthwhile.

Changing Direction and Finding My Path

The most compelling moment of my time at TCC came when I decided to switch my major from cybersecurity to programming. During my sophomore year, I began to have second

thoughts about cybersecurity because I did not feel as engaged by it as I had hoped, and I wanted more hands-on experience. I decided to try programming, but after two semesters, I realized it was not the right fit for me either. That experience left me feeling guilt and shame, and I started to believe I had wasted time and held myself back.

It was not until I attended a student body meeting and heard the provost speak that I found some peace of mind. She explained that it did not matter how many times a student changed majors, as long as they finished their degree. Even though she did not know what I was personally going through, that moment gave me clarity. It reminded me that I had not made a mistake; I simply needed to explore something different in order to understand what I truly wanted. What I had viewed as failure was actually a learning step that helped me better define my goals.

Once I re-declared my major as Cybersecurity, everything began to shift. I began gaining more hands-on experience and a better understanding of what the field required of me. In my final semester at TCC, in spring 2022, I competed against my peers in a Meta Capture the Flag competition. The competition involved solving digital puzzles built around flawed websites, locked apps, and encrypted files. My job was to use technical skills to decrypt and bypass security challenges in order to find flags and submit them for scoreboard points. By the end of the competition, my group placed sixth.

A few weeks after that competition, I also passed my CompTIA ITF+ certification exam. The test covered foundational IT concepts, infrastructure setup, and basic software development principles. It also challenged me on database usage, computer hardware configuration, and essential security practices for protecting digital assets. What made the exam demanding was not just memorization, but the need to think critically through each scenario and choose the most

appropriate technical solution. Passing that exam was another reminder that I was capable of succeeding in the field I had chosen.

With all of my experiences at TCC, I can truly say that cybersecurity became my full mission and dedication. I stayed determined and earned my Associate of Applied Science degree in spring 2022. Along the way, I also gained confidence in my ability to adapt, recover, and keep moving forward even when my path was uncertain. That period taught me that growth does not always come from staying comfortable. Sometimes it comes from trying something, learning from it, and then returning to your purpose with a clearer sense of direction.

Future Goals and Career Aspirations

Today, I am a senior at Old Dominion University with a projected graduation of fall 2026. My current goals focus on sharpening my skills at home by creating home labs, continuing ethical hacking practice on platforms such as Hack The Box and TryHackMe, and earning more certifications, such as CompTIA A+ and CompTIA Security+. I know these steps will help propel me further into the cybersecurity field and give me the confidence to grow technically and professionally.

Ultimately, my goal is to obtain a leadership position in Cybersecurity within hospitality. I would like to work as a corporate Information Technology specialist for a hospitality company such as Hilton. In that role, I envision contributing ideas that improve the technology systems used by hotel properties across the organization. I want to help create solutions that allow employees to perform their jobs more efficiently while also improving the overall guest experience. I also see myself confidently delivering presentations, leading project teams, and using my technical knowledge to bridge the gap between technology and hospitality operations.

By combining my years of leadership experience with my growing knowledge of computer systems, I believe I can make a meaningful impact on the future of hospitality technology. My path has included side quests and branching directions, but I understand that those experiences are part of what will eventually help me come into full circle. My dream is to work for Hilton Hotels in a role that blends leadership, technology, and service. Even though I am still navigating my way into a cybersecurity career, I know that each step is preparing me for that larger goal.