

# Gap Year Essay

I'm an obsessive planner so it always surprises people that I never make lists when I go to the grocery store. I go by what looks freshest and improvise around the ingredients that catch my eye. Sometimes it's spaghetti squash, other times it's seasonal pumpkin. Until this year, grocery stores were the only place that I felt comfortable winging it because I'm confident in my cooking. Since my gap year began, I've been working on bringing this confidence and improvisation to other areas of my life.

My choice to take a gap year was a product of anxiety and intense pressure I put on myself to plan out my entire life. In my senior year of high school, I thought it was necessary to know exactly what I was going to study in college and what my career would look like. Since I couldn't figure it out by myself, I asked my parents and college counselor for help. They knew that I was learning Python and urged me to pursue computer science. But when relatives asked me questions about my future as a developer, I felt panicky. Computer science wasn't my idea (and I wasn't excited about it), and the thought of jumping into something I felt ambivalent about filled me with dread. It seemed like everyone was excited for me to begin college except for me. My solution was a gap year.

I've only been in Florence for six weeks and I can already tell you that my strategy has been partially successful (however, not in the way I expected). I thought I'd discover an alternative to computer science. Maybe I'd fall in love with Renaissance Art or fashion--but that's not what happened.

There's a saying I keep hearing: *meglio tardi che mai* ("It will happen when it happens"), which unsettled me at first. As someone who is very structured and goal-oriented, I was bewildered by the idea of not sticking to a strict schedule, but I leaned into the lifestyle. On an unplanned excursion, I discovered an incredible family-owned corduroy shop that's been around for generations. I've taken impromptu weekend trips to Rome and Ibiza (without my usual neurotic planning beforehand) and stopped to enjoy historical sites that I would usually rush past. I've gradually warmed up to the *meglio tardi che mai* philosophy and it's changed how I plan for the future.

The perfect microcosm of my transformation is Florentine grocery shopping culture. In Florence, the ingredients are so fresh (and preservatives so rare) that you can only grocery shop for the day--you simply cannot meal prep for the entire week because everything will spoil. The shift I've undergone since my decision to take a gap year is morphing from an obsessive 'meal-prepper' to someone who shops for the day. Previously, I wasn't giving myself room to explore or

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make mistakes or discover unexpected interests. I was trying to create a 'grocery list' for college and my entire life.

Thanks to my time in Florence, I'm learning to supplement my planning tendencies with a healthy appreciation for improvisation. In other words, I'm learning to approach my future the same way I have always approached grocery shopping: without a list. For example, I'm taking an Italian Food and Culture class that has been so inspiring that I've decided to attend culinary school at Le Cordon Bleu starting January. I'm giving myself permission to ad lib and make decisions off the cuff, which has had the effect of reducing anxiety about the next steps of my life.

In Florence, I haven't had an epiphany about what my perfect future looks like. Instead, I've discovered a completely different mindset. I'm excited for a future in which I adapt to what's 'fresh' rather than adhering blindly to a master recipe.