

I'm 14 and a sophomore. Now, before you start trying to figure out how that would work—yes, I'm two grades ahead and homeschooled. Now, let me get another thing straight: high school is a lot. A lot of work, a lot of stress, a lot of drama. I've been dreading it since elementary school. Most people described it like Gandalf standing in the way of life, screaming at you that you shall not pass. But now, as a sophomore, I can say with almost absolute certainty that it's not quite as bad as they said—not if you focus on your work and your grades more than the drama. As for the stress, that's just prep for the real world.

As Nora Ephron said, "Your education is a dress rehearsal for the life that is yours to lead." What she exactly means by this, I don't know. I'm sure my literature professor would. Even though I don't have a PhD, I do have an idea of what she means—if you put a lot of work into your education, into your schoolwork, keeping your grades up, this helps prepare you for life outside of school, even outside of college. Putting effort into your work is something I've been taught since I was young. It's not just grammar or punctuation that good teachers look for—it's also making sure their student is actually doing the work, actually putting in effort.

Sometimes the most important part of high school is about finding who you are, so when you finish and go into college, you aren't pushed around by the melting pot of people there. You don't get so overwhelmed that you lose yourself in the crowd. Something that I believe helped me in this journey is the arts. I'm a dancer, I play the piano, and I frequently draw. I've been doing all these for a long time, but high school is the time you can focus on yourself and start molding yourself into the person you want to be. Because if you don't mold yourself, then other people are going to do it for you, and I don't know about you, but that sounds pretty terrible.

But even though you still need to make yourself, you also must become adaptable. I'm pretty sure we've always had the one stubborn, rock-headed friend that won't change their mind no matter what. And at times, I'm sure we've all been that friend at least once or twice. But we also must make sure that we don't mold ourselves into rock-hard statues—even if we look like Michelangelo created us. Even if that friend is amazing, eventually it becomes too much, and you either have to talk to them or drop them. And no one likes that. Being the friend who has opinions but doesn't fight losing battles is also very important.

While knowing when to stand firm and when to adapt is important, another challenge is balancing your passions—which shape you—with the relentless demands of school. For me, dance, piano, and art have never just been things I do; they are ways to calm down and process the chaos of high school, giving me moments to breathe outside the weight of expectations and assignments that are all too crushing sometimes. It doesn't matter if it's hitting the perfect turn, getting completely lost in a melody, or sketching something that feels perfect just in that moment—each and every one lets me stop in time and breathe, reconnecting me before I go back into the rush of school. Making sure you balance your effort between discipline and creativity has taught me just as much—maybe even more—than any textbook.

High school is full of pressure, discovery, and growth—sometimes just plain chaos. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that the adaptability and effort you put into your work matter just as much as intelligence. Looking ahead, I'm sure the challenges of life will get bigger: harder classes, bigger decisions, and the constant balance between passion and responsibility. But what I have to carry forward alongside that knowledge is the understanding that it's effort that shapes everything. Whether it's school, people, or passions, the work you put in determines what you get out.

As I move into my junior year, my goal is to refine that balance—to push myself in my studies while also making time for the things that hold me together. I want to make sure that by the time high school ends, I've built a strong foundation, enough to handle whatever is coming next in the storm of college and life beyond that. More than anything, I want to keep shaping myself—not just for high school, not just for college, but for life beyond both.