

My failure story

The CAF News letter publishes winning essays of the 2023 'KAISTian Failure Story Contest'. The two winning essays in this issue are recipients of the "Challenge Award." They share experiences of KAISTians who are constantly attempting, challenging themselves, experiencing failures and setbacks, and learning valuable life lessons as a result.

Winning essays from the CAF contest

KAISTian story



You Are What You Set Your Mind Into

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As I am left with my last few months before I (hopefully) finish my studies at KAIST, I am struck with occasional moments of reminiscing my undergraduate years, thinking about whether I've spent it productively. And in every one of these recollections, I could not imagine my life at KAIST without my stint as a staff reporter in The KAIST Herald, which is the university's official English newspaper. In fact, I could say it was one of my defining identities in the KAIST community, at least for those who know me on a quite personal level. My writing skills would be validated and complimented on multiple occasions and scenarios, as I could write up elegantly and coherently structured articles in a short period of time. My English presentation skills would also receive as much appreciation, especially with my capability to do impromptu presentations on my class projects or guided tours with barely any preparation or scripts. As much as I feel flattered hearing these, I've always taken them with a grain of salt. I am not a native English speaker, and I just rather saw these skills as a nonnegotiable essential, especially for international students in KAIST.

But a particular moment in my winter internship prompted me to reflect deeply on these skills. After writing a required documentation in Korean for my company in less than an hour, a colleague praised me for how well-structured and clearly-written the documentation was. To me, it was a simple documentation that I made with the limited Korean that I had, but apparently its structure was impressive and comprehensible enough for a native speaker. My colleague mentioned that it required some degree of mental coherence to organize one's ideas very clearly in a limited means of communication, such as using a different language, and was genuinely surprised at how I managed to pull it off. Now this could be just an effort to strike up small talk or a simple act of workplace courtesy, but it got me thinking too. I've successfully repressed my feelings of proudness at every compliment I receive that I downplayed the difficulty of what I actually do. Besides, most people would find it close to impossible to write at least a decipherable piece of text in a language they are not as comfortable at. I realized that these skills stemmed from a slew of high school experiences, which still remain as my most favorite

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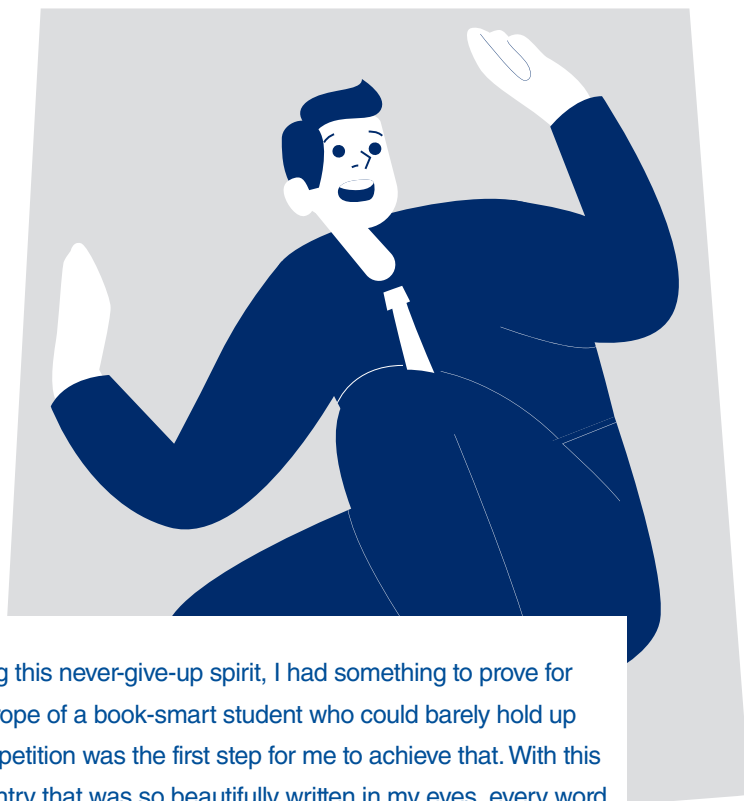
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story of failure that partly shaped the way I think until now.

In KAIST, my communication skills are at a proficient level while my academics are average at most, but back in high school I was the complete opposite. I was very studious and had impressive academic grades, but my language proficiency was, to my standards, subpar. It was sufficient enough to accelerate myself towards the higher levels of English classes, but those classes were filled with students with native-like proficiencies. They had extensive depths of vocabulary, accents that sounded so professional and pleasing, and great coherence in their articles as their sentences are strung up with purposeful elegance. Meanwhile, I struggled to write up a single sentence that was meaningful, let alone paragraphs that made sense when joined together. I had immense stage fright and failed to speak in front of people with conviction and acceptable pronunciation. Grouped with students whose language skills prosper in stark contrast to mine, I was terribly pressured to perform well.

The most memorably painful experience at that time was when I challenged myself to join the school-held English writing contest that is conducted annually. I spent nights writing and preparing my submission, only to end up not having won a single award. On the other hand, the names of my fellow peers who also got accelerated in our English classes were plastered all over the board of winners. At the time, I felt really incapable, lacking, and utterly disappointed at myself. I was known for being good at my studies – which already loses its potency in my high school where everyone is good at studying – but I couldn't force myself to go beyond it. I was even consoled by some of my friends and family members with the advice that it would be better for me to focus on my strengths instead of dwelling on my weaknesses, so I don't appear too vulnerable in the public eye and subject myself to so much criticism. I don't resent or blame them for these comments, and in retrospect, there are merits to this advice along with their genuine concern for me. But at that moment I felt very restrained, as if I couldn't amount to anything more than what I already was. I definitely hated the feeling of being told what I could and could not do, more so that it was unconsciously consented by the people around me. So, in the next year, I decided to challenge myself again and participate in the competition once more.

This time, I dedicated more efforts to perfecting my submission, crafting every sentence and idea carefully. I skimmed through several samples of articles to gain inspiration from their writing styles and learn some other effective writing techniques and tips. I also made sure to humbly ask for feedback from my well-trusted friends and peers, then refine my submission based on their comments. In hindsight, I may be motivated by the embarrassment of my previous loss and did



not want to give up. But more than having this never-give-up spirit, I had something to prove for myself. I strongly wanted to escape the trope of a book-smart student who could barely hold up to social situations, and winning the competition was the first step for me to achieve that. With this primary drive, I ended up turning in an entry that was so beautifully written in my eyes, every word resonated the hard work and thoughts that I poured into it. It was something I could proudly show others even if it didn't win. And the next thing I knew, my submission did the Best Prize among all participants. I was super ecstatic upon hearing the news, and felt very proud of myself for pushing my limits.

This was only the start of my growth; in the following year, I participated again in the competition, this time winning two prizes for two essay submissions I wrote. I also pushed myself to join our school's Korean speaking contest, which is not related to English but did give me a grip of my confidence in public speaking. And now that I am in KAIST, I got the chance to write for The KAIST Herald, where every article I turned in for publication was heavily edited and scrutinized by my fellow writers and editors. I vividly remember every document I submitted being bloodied with corrections and suggestions, making me question once more my skills. Yet as I look back, it is these struggles that made me improve vastly. I've gained a profound sense of confidence in how I communicate, both verbally and in written form. I can now securely say that I am proud of my language skills just as much as my academic and technical skills (although my personality is still not perfect and still needs some quite of work). And it is these skills that propelled me to also be better in Korean, just so I can expand on my ways of reaching out and communicating with other people.

From these experiences, there were three main lessons that I will hold onto dearly. The first one is to **acknowledge your limits**. This may sound counterintuitive from the story just told, but in order to grow out of your limits, you first need to recognize its existence and how it holds you back. Take a closer look, piece by piece, and understand how you can unshackle yourself from it. Sooner or later, you will realize where to start. When I prepared for the competition – and this habit is still something I do up until now – I spent several hours or days reading up important information before starting my write-up. It was a huge difference from what I did before wherein I started writing right away, because that's what I saw my other peers who are already good at writing do.

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But they were already good at it and could write any essays with their eyes closed, and I still was not. I had to do things my way, and as soon as I realized it, I was able to improve at a reasonable pace. Now, I could write articles in a short period of time and feel satisfied at it. Accepting your current situation is the first step towards growing out of it.

This brings me to the second lesson: **do things at your own pace**. Understand where you are in your path towards your goal, and tailor your steps according to it. While it is important to observe how others operate and take some inspiration from it, do not fully use it as your template. As I was improving my communication skills over time, I realized that I did not need as much depth in my vocabulary as I thought I would, unlike my peers. What mattered more was that I could send my message across to people; especially since not everyone is a native English speaker, being understood is more crucial than being fancy. I also did not need to develop an American accent, but rather just improve my accent to a degree where I enunciate words properly. Such realizations relieved a lot of burden on my shoulders, which helped me channel my energy towards other elements of my growth that really mattered.

Finally, and perhaps this is the best lesson I took from the experience, **you are who you set your mind to be**. My first writing competition win gave me such an elated feeling and a clear belief in myself that I can be good in anything I want if I set my mind into it. I surely did it when I pushed my writing and presentation skills to improve. I believe it was the same mindset I held when I decided to pursue Mechanical Engineering and Computer Science in KAIST, even though I had zero experiences in the past attesting to my potential in these fields. And if I wanted to study another entirely different field of science, I am confident that I will be able to do it. I recognize that there are other external factors that may prevent someone from being who they want to become, such as financial reasons, but excluding such factors other than the sheer determination, anyone can grow out of their limits and be an improved person. And as long as this willpower is coupled with a healthy mix of realism, it is more than enough to fuel my drive towards any goal I set for myself.