

PERSONAL ESSAY FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER

ASSIGNMENT

Grading:

Brainstorming/Planning/Drafting/Editing:

Expectations Sheet: _____/10

“I” Brainstorming Sheet: _____/10

5 Short Responses: _____/10

Outline: _____/10

Draft: _____/50

Peer Evaluations: _____/10

Quiz Grade: _____/100

Finalizing:

Final Typed Essay

Test Grade: _____/100

Name: _____ Period: _____

College or Career Expectations

Directions: Depending on your future goals, please answer one question for each of the six (6) categories in a minimum of 5-6 sentences.

1. What excites you about attending college? **OR** What excites you about entering the workforce?

2. What fears do you have about attending college? **OR** What fears do you have about entering the workforce?

3. What are you looking for in a college (e.g., majors, extracurricular activities, size, location, etc.)? **OR** What are you looking for in a career (e.g., desk job, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., flexible hours, large or small company, health benefits, salary, etc.)?

4. Do you want to go away to college or stay home? Why? **OR** Do you want your job to be close to home, or do you want to commute to work? Why?

5. To which schools are you thinking of applying? Why? **OR** At which companies are you looking to interview? Why?

6. How are you feeling about the college **OR** career application/interview process? What steps, if any, have you taken to prepare yourself for this process (e.g., visiting schools, researching schools or perspective companies online, creating a resume, etc.)?



Directions: Write a list of 20 sentences that begin with "I" to brainstorm ideas for your college essay. Think of things that make you unique, things you like, etc.

1. I

2. I

3. I

4. I

5. I

6. I

7. I

8. I

9. I

10. I

11. I

12. I

13. I

14. I

15. I

16. I

17. I

18. I

19. I

20. I

Name: _____

Short Response Questions

Directions: Respond to each of the following questions in paragraph form (approximately 100-150 words). Be as specific as possible in your responses.

1. Elaborate on one of your activities (work, extracurricular, volunteer, etc.).

2. What obstacles are you proud to have faced or conquered? Why?

3. What career do you want to pursue? Why?

4. Describe a person or event that has changed your life.

5. For what are you thankful/grateful? Why?

(3)

College Essay Dos and Don'ts

Excerpted from *50 Successful Harvard Application Essays*

- ✓ ***Think strategically.*** Your essay is an opportunity to show a part of yourself that neither your tests scores nor your grades can convey. If you devote the essay to rehashing what is already apparent in the rest of the application, you lose valuable space for self-expression.
- ✓ ***Be reflective.*** Speak from the heart. This is what gives your application a human component and differentiates you from everyone else. It's important to show how you have changes and developed into the person you are today.
- ✓ ***Brainstorm ideas*** with friends, family members and teachers. Your essay can always benefit from constructive criticism.
- ✓ ***Avoid clichés*** in your writing and be original in your ideas. This applies for images within your writing as well as for the topic of the essay itself. Some ideas have been done at least a thousand times before you.
- ✓ ***Steer away from gimmicks.*** People have pulled them off, but to do it, you have to do it well. If you're a great cartoonist, send in those comic strips. Or if you're a wonderful poet, go for it. Don't attempt to invent something just to make your essay stand out.
- ✓ ***If you don't know what a word means, don't use it.*** Remember the "KISS" rule: keep it simple, stupid. Don't overwhelm the reader with extraneous details.
- ✓ ***Stay "on message".*** Admissions officers will read your essay in less than a few minutes, so keep the scale of your story manageable. Read through the essay several times and trim repetitive or nonfunctional sentences. Don't expect to express all the nuances and complexities of your story in less than 500 words.
- ✓ ***Start strong.*** Try to grab the reader's attention from the beginning. Make it easy for them, make them want to read on.
- ✓ ***Conclusions are important.*** Don't ruin a perfectly good essay by launching into broad, sweeping generalizations. Returning to your opening line in your ending sentence is a good way to tie it all together. The conclusion must resonate with the reader.
- ✓ ***PROOFREAD. PROOFREAD. PROOFREAD.***

College Application Essays Step-by-Step
excerpt from CollegeXpress

<http://www.collegeexpress.com/articles-and-advice/admission/articles/college-applications/college-application-essays-step-step/>

How do you take a generic application essay prompt and turn it into a personal statement that brings tears of joy to admission counselors' eyes? Well, you can start by following the steps in the example below!

Step One: The Prompt

Ease yourself into the process. Take time to understand the question being asked.
At XYZ University, we believe in the power of diversity across all fields of study, beyond racial and ethnic quotas. Based on your background and personal experiences, describe a situation where you fostered diversity.

Step Two: Brainstorming

Get your creative juices flowing by brainstorming all the possible ideas you can think of to address your essay question.

Possible Topics for XYZ University Application Essay:

- Habitat for Humanity volunteering experience
- Love of science as a girl with microscope story. Make it funny?
- Week at marine biology summer camp in Maine
- Person who taught me about diversity: Teacher? Fictional character?
- How the TV show "Lost" changed my perception of diversity (and reality)

Step Three: The Outline

Map out what you're going to write by making an outline.

I. Intro: Childhood science experiment scene

- a. Dialogue with mom*
- b. MUST GRAB ATTENTION*

II. Love of science, exploration, and experiments

- a. Beauty of micro world, fascination*

III. High school

- a. Classes, uncovering love of other subjects*
- b. Lack of other girls in classes and clubs*

IV. College search

- a. Dive into college studies*
- b. Campus visit and trip to lab*
- c. Student-faculty research?*

V. Conclusion

- a. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) fields and women in the future*
- b. Tie back into being a little girl*

Step Four: The Essay

Once you are satisfied with your essay in outline format, begin writing!

My mother entered my bedroom and immediately scrunched up her face in disgust. "Oh my Lord. What is that smell?"

I froze, panicked. I had been discovered.

Twelve-year-old me was sitting at my desk when she came in. Before me was a small, red, plastic microscope, surrounded by glass slides and "organic" samples. One such sample just happened to be a chicken liver (or maybe it was a kidney) I plucked out of the giblet packet when Mom was making dinner . . . a week before.

I had been keeping the sample in a Petri dish with my other scientific materials on my desk, shaving off a few thin slices every day to examine using my microscope—the best Christmas present I ever received. (It definitely beat all the Barbie dolls my grandma kept sending to compensate for what she called a "boy's toy.")

"What is that?" Mom demanded. "Is that meat? Is that raw meat?" With the microscope in front of me, my mother immediately understood what was going on, but as pleased as she was with my passion for science, there were some things she would not tolerate—or so I thought.

I braced myself for the punishment and the tragic loss of an excellent tissue sample. But when my mother told me I could continue my research until my materials were gone (it was a small liver, after all), I was overjoyed. I would've hugged her, but I had work to do.

That microscope was my battery-powered window to a fascinating world no one else could see. Who could've imagined that the maple leaves scattered on our driveway held a patchwork of perfect green? Or that the microscope's light could illuminate such a complex collection of purple and pink cells in a (admittedly, pretty gross) piece of chicken liver? Ten times the magnifying power of my naked eye was just okay, but once I cranked the scope up to 200x, each individual cell suddenly gained definition, its own shape and size in a sea of thousands.

I would stay up hours past my bedtime with my eye pressed to the eyepiece, keeping detailed records and sketches of everything I found in a notebook. My parents eventually bought me a more powerful scope in high school; this one plugged into the wall.

As my days filled up with after-school jobs, extracurricular meetings, and choral rehearsals, I missed exploring the minutiae of the world around me. I relished every class period spent in biology and organic chemistry. When I encountered elective science courses with more focus, my interest grew, even as my classmates dwindled—especially those with two X chromosomes. Whenever I considered joining a science club, I felt isolated. Every time, without fail, I was the only girl. And, with time, I would lose my nerve and stop showing up to meetings.

During a campus visit last year, I visited one of XYZ University's undergraduate labs. The sight of all the equipment sent a rush of excitement through me like that Christmas morning I opened my first microscope. Today, I imagine spending hours in the lab (probably way past my bedtime) and seeing my name published in a research journal, perhaps alongside an XYZ University faculty member. Unlike high school, I'm now hoping to enter a place where even if we're still outnumbered, women will be important, contributing members of the program.

I know I'm one of the lucky ones to enter the application process knowing what I want to study, and I finally do not feel disadvantaged as a member of a female minority. Instead, I'm excited and rather proud to represent women in a STEM field. Our numbers are growing, and my future classmates and I will lead the next generation of scientists. I hope we inspire other little girls with their own secret science experiments. Then again, maybe those girls won't feel compelled to hide them.

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College Essay Sample

This is the actual essay a student submitted with his application to Denison University in Granville, Ohio, and it helped him gain admission there. Check out the essay, then make sure you read our tips below!

William J. Altman, Personal Essay

That summer was filled with fast car rides, the wind in my hair, and rock and roll in my ears. The excitement and adrenaline of the days were countered by cool, relaxing nights by a crackling campfire with friends. It was truly the best of times. Yet throughout that summer's three months of an easy ride, I felt a sense of longing that permeated every look in the mirror.

It is 10:30 in the morning on the first Monday back to school from summer vacation. Like clockwork the bell sounds and signals me to journey from my seat in AP Calculus, down the longest hallway in my school, to my International Relations class. However, today is no ordinary day for me. Today, I rock. With a bounce in my stride and a swagger in my glide, I make my way down the corridor and past countless students with a sense of pride. My confidence is not the result of the clothes I am wearing or of my social status. Nonetheless, my attitude is worn. It is worn with the emblem of a true renegade, a take-no-flak-from-anybody badge.

Today, I have facial hair.

Not peach fuzz or stubble, but a beard. A beard is something that signifies the step from a boy to a man. A beard is something I have waited for, ever since I received my first razor without the slightest bit of need for it. The summer was my transformation period—my beard, my pride.

As I continue my journey, I walk with my chin held high and my lips pushed together. My eyes are wide open, and I am smirking. Nobody can touch me. I am a senior on my way to bigger and better things with a way to show it. Nobody can touch me.

BEEEEEP!!! Wait, where did everybody go? That couldn't have been the bell. "Son, do you have a pass?" An administrator with a deep voice like James Earl Jones is towering over me. He has an exquisite beard. It hangs from his chin and begs for me to cling to it and ride around for the day. "Son, are you ok? I need a pass or you will have to go to the late room for this period." The hallway is idle with silence. I feel like I should keep my voice down.

"No sir, you see I don't have a pass, but I can explain . . ." Will he buy my story about today being a special day, a day for which I have waited months? I mean, honestly, as a fellow beardy you would think he could empathize.

"Son, go to the late room and don't be late again." I begin to panic. What will I miss in this period—critical notes, a pop-quiz? This is only the second time in my high school career that I have been late to class. My emblem of pride and months of waiting for the long walk have been sidelined and burned.

I reach the holding room and check in with the bald and seemingly hairless teacher at the desk. He makes a joke about a senior being late to class and says, "What happened? You get lost?" Funny. He lets me pick my seat and doesn't proceed to lay down any laws of the land. I appreciate his relaxed and understanding attitude. After sitting down and taking a deep breath, I make amends with my shattered ego and remember that the class I am missing is watching a movie. As I place my arms behind my head and lean back to stretch, I notice a poster of Che Guevara on the wall. I sit and stare, taking in the vibrant orange and dull green contrast of the poster. He stares back. Someday, my friend. Someday.

That night I shaved my beard. For one, I learned that if shaved, the hair might grow back twice as thick, but more importantly I realized that my journey into manhood is just beginning. I realized that there is no one specific point in a person's life when he simply becomes a man. Growing up involves experience and disappointment. But as long as I put forth the patience and determination that have gone into my beard, I'll be ready for almost any hairy situation.

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What Makes This A Good Essay?

- This essay isn't just on time; it's well before the Early Decision deadline. Meeting deadlines is crucial in the college application process, especially if you are applying Early Decision or Early Action.
- While this introduction seems generic and clichéd, it leads to a humorous—and unexpected—essay topic. William slowly reveals his subject, drawing his readers in with anticipation. Great introductions hook readers and entice them to read more.
- William doesn't really stray from the morning of the first day of senior year. A focused essay like this allows for more detail, which brings the story to life. Pick a specific moment and really explore it; make the reader feel like they are there.
- This is an original, memorable piece, which is perfect because admission staff read hundreds and sometimes thousands of essays. Pick a topic that makes your essay stand out!
- You can tell that William has a good sense of humor—his unique voice and personality are in every line. That is the ultimate goal of the application essay: convey your personality.
- This essay is about what growing up means to William, which he illustrates with a humorous anecdote. A memorable essay is more show than tell.
- Contrary to popular belief, it is possible to write a funny and effective application essay. If you're naturally funny, trust your instincts. But if you feel more comfortable writing a more serious essay, that's okay too. Bottom line? Be genuine.
- The final paragraphs succinctly and eloquently conclude William's essay, but it also ends on a funny note, which brings the piece full-circle.
- This essay is also good because of everything that's not there; it is free of misspellings, it is an appropriate length, and there are no run-on sentences or lengthy paragraphs.

College Essay Sample

This is the actual essay a student submitted with her application to St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, and it helped her gain admission there. Check out the essay, then make sure you read the tips below!

Morganne Wheeler, Personal Essay

"Where the heck is it?" I asked aloud as I ripped through every drawer and closet.

"Mom!" I screamed, as I pulled the rumpled, size 6-8 Cinderella dress from the overstuffed Hefty bag in the center of my floor. How could my mother callously have cast aside the dress that served as my cousin Bradley's trademark costume for my annual family Christmas production?

I pounded down the stairs and found my mother innocently making dinner. I put on my most terrifying eight-year-old face and held up the crinkled Disney creation. "Just what do you think Brad is gonna wear this year?" My mother would learn the extreme sentimental value of this dress and how it would serve to remind us of Bradley and our innocence.

Kindred spirits, both left-handed and white-haired and born only weeks apart, Brad and I spent every preschool day together in mutual adoration. After all, he had what appeared to be two belly buttons and his scars were much more impressive than mine. Thankfully, I did not understand the correlation between those holes and scars and his having been deprived of oxygen at birth due to a badly malformed heart, a birth defect that would severely impair his ability to learn. Brad and I, sporting plastic sunglasses, spent our early years cruising the yard in my pink Barbie Beach Buggy, from which I had diligently scraped the Barbie sticker to make it look less like an embarrassing "girlie" car. We romped around the house, ripping heads off dolls, sneaking sugary items, and whipping ourselves off the swings in an effort to land on the paved driveway. It is the laughter I remember when I think of these days, not Brad's disability.

My perception drastically altered when I entered fourth grade. "Hey, retard!" one boy shouted at recess as one of his henchmen chucked the ball at Brad's head. I was not sure what a retard was, but the sound of it made me wince. I launched myself at the ringleader, swinging and crying. I chased them off, the buttons hanging from my now-muddy jumper. I was baffled, and the pain I felt had nothing to do with my bleeding knees. I looked at Bradley and he was smiling at me, not understanding what had just happened, and I was grateful, and forever changed.

As we grew older, our paths diverged. Brad took the path that so many look on with pity as "slow" and "unfortunate." Initially, I felt guilty for growing up without him. As I write my essays for college and complain about the work involved in applications, I think about Brad, who gets pumped to take his permit test and fails every time, but will persevere. He will never fit the societal ideal of a "normal" person or a "successful"

person and I abhor the elitist thinking that insists that my life must have more meaning than his. Watching him grow up has helped me to overcome what could have been my handicap. He is compassionate and determined in spite of thousands of setbacks. And when we all grumble about the burdens of life, I think of Brad and wonder, who is the happier person? He finds joy in things like putting aside money from his grocery store job to buy me a Christmas gift, or saving me all the red gummy bears. He does not lament how few friends he has, but is glad to be with the few who know and appreciate him. I do not feel lucky for being different than Brad. I feel lucky for knowing him. He has taught me that more intelligent does not equal better, and it certainly does not equal happier. What does mark the superior person is the nature of his heart and soul, and Brad's are pure and joyful and suffused with love.

"Scene two, take one." Bradley enters, surrounded by a chorus of characters consisting of my brother and cousins. He is wearing the tattered, size 6-8 Cinderella dress. "Kung Fu Fighting" comes on, and that's his cue. He throws himself into my meticulously choreographed dance, and when the song ends, executes his grand finale, standing on one slightly bent leg. And in the silence between the end of the song and the applause, you can hear the dress ripping a little more.

What Makes This a Good Essay?

- This essay isn't just on time; it's well before the Early Decision deadline. Meeting deadlines is crucial in the college application process, especially if you are applying Early Decision or Early Action.
- The essay begins with a story that grabs the reader's attention immediately. Make it interesting. Admission counselors read hundreds and sometimes thousands of essays, so yours needs to stand out.
- Morganne uses enough details and dialogue to paint a vivid picture. Because she has chosen very specific moments, she can make the scenes come to life without writing a novel.
- She introduces Bradley's condition in a thoughtful, straightforward manner. His life and their experiences together are inspiring, so her story does not need to be exaggerated.
- The essay has a focused, clear topic; it does not stray from Bradley, his life, and how Morganne finds him inspiring.
- Morganne lists specific reasons why she finds Bradley inspirational and what she has learned from him.
- Her essay is about appreciating what you have, who you are, and what truly matters in life. Instead of saying that outright, she tells a story that illustrates her point. A memorable essay is more show than tell.
- Morganne ends her story where it began, with the Cinderella dress, bringing the essay full-circle.

2019-2020 Common Application Essay Prompts

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Name: _____

Peer Evaluations

Directions: Have two of your classmates read and evaluate your essay using the chart below. Attach this sheet to your essay before turning it in.

Essay (circle one) ONE TWO

Reader #1: _____

List three things you learned about the writer from reading this essay.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List three comments/suggestions for the writer of the essay.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Essay (circle one) ONE TWO

Reader #1: _____

List three things you learned about the writer from reading this essay.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List three comments/suggestions for the writer of the essay.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

College/Personal Essay Rubric

Name: _____

QUALITY	Excellent (20-19 points)	Average (18-15 points)	Below Average (14-10 points)	Poor (9-0 points)
<p>Content The degree to which the essay engages the reader, identifies a specific topic, and concludes in a satisfying manner.</p>	<p>~Introduction is engaging and draws in the reader. ~Essay topic is specific and clear. ~Conclusion fully conveys the significance of the story.</p>	<p>~Introduction attempts to engage the reader but may be cliché. ~Essay topic is specific and clear. ~Conclusion explains the significance of the story, but may be cliché.</p>	<p>~Introduction is basic, with little or no attempt to engage the reader. ~Essay topic is vague or general. ~Conclusion is general and does not explain the significance of the story.</p>	<p>~No introduction and/or conclusion. ~Essay topic is unclear.</p>
<p>Development The degree to which the essay tells an interesting, personal, and detailed story, providing insight about the writer.</p>	<p>~Essay topic is of personal importance to the writer. ~Numerous, specific, and vivid details keep the reader interested and allow the reader to gain deeper insight into the life and/or personality of the writer.</p>	<p>~Essay topic is of personal importance to the writer. ~Many specific details keep the reader interested and allow the reader to gain some insight into the life and/or personality of the writer.</p>	<p>~Personal importance of the essay topic is unclear. ~Few details provided. ~Reader gains little insight into the life and/or personality of the writer.</p>	<p>~Essay topic is of little or no importance to the writer. ~No details are provided. ~Reader gains no insight into the life and/or personality of the writer.</p>
<p>Language Use The degree to which the writer uses literary devices and a distinctive voice to enhance the telling of his/her story.</p>	<p>~Incorporates various literary devices which enhance the story. ~Distinctive voice that appropriately conveys the writer's personality.</p>	<p>~Incorporates some literary devices to enhance the story. ~Distinctive voice that may become conversational at times.</p>	<p>~Little or no attempt to use literary devices. ~Little sense of voice; tone of essay may be inappropriate for the audience.</p>	<p>~No literary devices are used. ~No sense of voice and/or tone of essay is inappropriate for the audience.</p>
<p>Organization The degree to which the essay remains on topic follows a logical sequence of ideas, and utilizes transitions to maintain coherence and establish sequence.</p>	<p>~Remains focused and develops ideas logically with transitions.</p>	<p>~Remains focused and develops ideas logically; transitions between ideas are not as smooth.</p>	<p>~Remains somewhat focused; ideas are somewhat developed, but transitions between ideas are rough.</p>	<p>~Writing is unfocused; little or no attempt is made to organize or use transitions between ideas.</p>
<p>Conventions The degree to which the essay demonstrates correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, and paragraph structure.</p>	<p>~Contains minimal or no spelling errors or grammatical errors. ~Uses correct punctuation and capitalization. ~Displays proper paragraph structure.</p>	<p>~Contains some spelling errors or grammatical errors. ~Displays some errors in punctuation and capitalization. ~Shows some paragraph structure.</p>	<p>~Contains many spelling errors or grammatical errors. ~Displays some errors in punctuation and capitalization. ~Errors may affect comprehension. ~Little paragraph structure.</p>	<p>~Contains many spelling errors or grammatical errors. ~Displays many errors in punctuation and capitalization. ~Errors affect comprehension. ~No paragraph structure.</p>

Lateness: _____

GRADE: _____

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PROMPT #1: Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

The Common App's Prompt #1 is the Old Faithful of essay questions. It's been around for years and offers all the flexibility an applicant could ask for from a prompt, with just enough direction to get those creative fountains flowing. Focus on the key words, "background," "identity," "interest," and "talent," and use them as launch points for your brainstorming. What about your history, personality, hobbies, or accomplishments might be worth highlighting for an admissions officer? It can be something as small as seeing an episode of a television show (are you living life in the Upside Down?) or as large as the struggle of moving to a foreign country (especially if you had to leave behind grandma's cooking). The most important thing to consider for this prompt is that your subject and/or perspective is dynamic and specific to you and who you are and no one else.

Some questions to ask yourself as you brainstorm:

- What about my history or background sets me apart from my peers?
- How do I define myself? How do the people who are closest to me define me?
- What have I achieved that has been integral in molding my character and ambitions?
- What, in my seventeen years on this earth, has helped shape the person I am today?

And some examples to consider:

- Has your family's love of food and your resultant adventurous tastes and culinary curiosity allowed you to connect with cultures from around the world?
- Does your crazy, dyed-blue hair define you?
- Did going to a Picasso exhibit inspire you to start an art collection that has since expanded beyond the borders of your bedroom?
- Have your yearly trips to see your extended family in China revealed something to you

about your parents' ability to overcome challenges and the work ethic you have absorbed as a result?

- What are the challenges and rewards of having same-sex parents? Or of being raised by your siblings? Or of being part of a family made up of stepsisters and stepbrothers?

Overall, this prompt is what we at College Essay Advisors call a "choose-your-own-adventure" prompt. It has historically served as a fabulous catch-all for subjects that don't fit within the confines of the other prompt options. A recent addition to the Common App's prompt selection now offers even more freedom to applicants (more on that later), but students should still think of Prompt #1 as a topic of immense choice, reeled in by a few helpful guidelines.



PROMPT #2: The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

We have always believed that essays about overcoming obstacles are most effective when they focus more on solutions than problems. Accordingly, Prompt #2 essays should be predominantly filled with a student's response, outlook, and demeanor when presented with one of life's many hurdles, rather than a detailed account of the hurdle itself. Applicants should aim to showcase qualities like resilience, determination, and humility. The obstacles you choose to explore can vary widely in nature, especially with the recent additions that allow students to explore challenges and setbacks in

addition to failures. They can be as serious as being tormented by bullies, as ingrained as the financial issues that have plagued your family for years, or as seemingly pedestrian as a mistake that costs you a tip while waiting tables. While the possibilities are almost endless, students should be careful not to choose challenges that may seem trite (the inability to achieve an A on an exam and/or secure tickets to that Drake concert) or that illustrate a lapse in good judgment (that time you crashed your car or ate 15 bags of Cheetos in one sitting). Still, if you can isolate an incident of trial in your life and illustrate how you learned from it, this can be a rewarding prompt to explore.

Some key questions to consider:

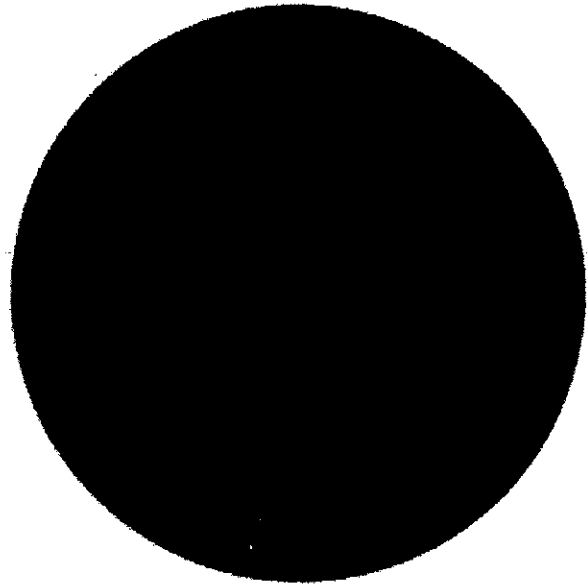
- How do you deal with hardship?
- What qualifies as a challenge or setback in your life and world?
- Are you the kind of person who can rebound and turn every experience, good or bad, into one from which you can learn something? What experiences might illustrate this quality?
- What have been some of the major challenges you've encountered in your life? And was there a silver lining?

And a few examples to think about:

- Has a lifelong battle with stuttering ultimately increased your overall confidence and allowed you to participate in social activities and public forums without self-judgment?
- Did a parent's fragile health situation challenge you to take on more responsibilities than the average teenager?
- Did a series of setbacks on your road to becoming a child actor introduce you to screenwriting, your professional goal and biggest passion?
- Did your failure to follow directions lead you to a botched home science experiment (root beer explosion!) and an appreciation for a balance of creativity and planned procedure?

Overall, try to keep these stories as positive as possible. Remember, these essays are not contemplative musings on your toughest times or reflections on the hiccups that populate everyday life (though these things can certainly be touched upon);

they are about overcoming obstacles and refusing to submit to life's greatest challenges.



PROMPT #3: Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

This remains one of the most challenging prompts of the Common App's selection, even though it has become slightly friendlier with the addition of the option to discuss a time you *questioned* an idea instead of challenged one. This prompt requires a student to speak passionately about beliefs and ideology, which are often onerous subjects that can be difficult to mold into compact stories. It can be one of the hardest questions to steer in a positive, productive direction without traveling into preachy, overly didactic territory. This is also a more precarious prompt than most in that students need to carefully assess the risks of espousing beliefs that might be polarizing for the readers of their applications.

That said, a response to this prompt can be incisive and deeply personal, as it was for a student who stood up to her parents' old-fashioned outlook on feminism. Applicants who can articulate their thoughts and feelings while showcasing malleability and willingness to thoughtfully consider the ideas of others will likely stand out as valuable additions to any campus. If this prompt jumps out at you because you have a very specific story to tell or opinion to voice, run with it!

Consider these questions as you brainstorm:

- When has your opinion been unpopular?
- Why are you the kind of person who is willing to stand up for what you believe in?
- What is important to you on a fundamental level of morals and values?
- How passionate are you about the things you believe in?

And here are a few examples for you to ponder:

- Are you openly gay in a strict Catholic school environment? What has that meant for your self-esteem and personal relationships?
- Did you work as an intern on a political campaign caught at the center of a scandal? How did you react?
- Did you challenge the idea of horror as a throw-away genre by executing an extensive research paper on the subject, launching a horror movie club at school, and arranging the most elaborate, best-received haunted house your neighborhood has ever seen?

Your essay does not have to be focused around a fundamentally serious or groundbreaking issue (see the horror genre example above). What matters most when responding to this prompt is that you have strong convictions about the belief or idea you are trying to convey, and that you examine the personal effects of this ethos on your life and world. For this reason, Prompt #3 can be a great vehicle for showcasing your consideration, persuasive skills, and passions to admissions.

PROMPT #4: Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma-anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

We love Prompt #4, which asks students to talk about a problem and how they have solved or are planning to solve it. This question is similar to Prompt #2 in that it is meant to tease out a student's problem-solving skills and provide a glimpse into an applicant's frame of mind when dealing with challenges. It also provides a few bonus opportunities for creative expression, leaving both the scale and the time frame for setting up a problem/solution wide open.

Students should think about everything from more traditional obstacles they have had to overcome to the small predicaments that have inspired them to think about what they really value. Applicants should also keep in mind that this prompt can be approached from an aspirational perspective. In other words: you don't have to simply choose from problems you've already solved. Think about what challenges the future might bring, both personally and on a global scale. How might you be part of meaningful progress and problem-solving moving forward?

Some other questions to ponder:

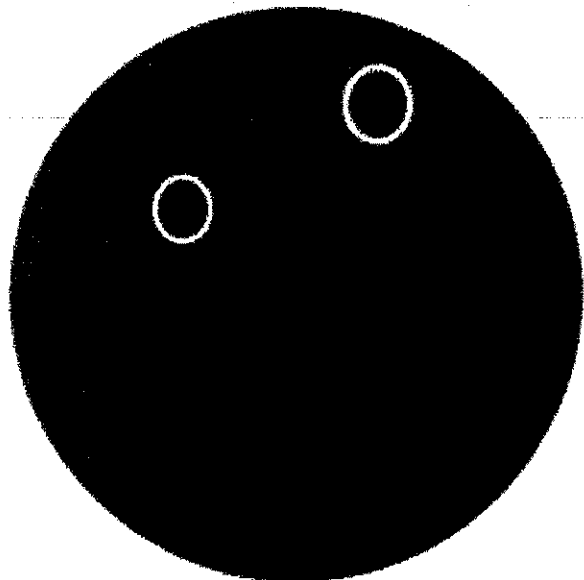
- When have you been proactive in attempting to effect change? What inspires you to take action?
- What kind of mark would you like to leave on the world?
- How do you think you can positively contribute to a cause that is important to you?
- If you had the power to make a lasting impact in any area at all, what would it be?

And examples to use as food for thought:

- Has your love of nature inspired you to start a charity to help save local endangered species?
- Did your desire to make a stronger, non-tearable hockey skate lace launch you on an entrepreneurial adventure you never fully anticipated?
- Has your commitment to pursuing medical research inspired you to contact your favorite professors and researchers for summer lab positions, and to read every scientific paper you can get your hands on?

It is important that the problem you choose is linked to your life and world in a meaningful way. The whole purpose of this exercise is to reveal something valuable about yourself to admissions, so be sure to link the problem you highlight to your passions, actions, or aspirations. And don't forget to detail at least a few

steps you would/could take to solve your chosen quandary. While the prompts don't really matter in the initial conception phases of an essay (as you now know), once you've settled into your prompt of choice, following instructions to the fullest and answering all parts of each question are critical.



PROMPT #5: Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

This is a heavily revised version of one of 2016's prompts, which asked students to describe a transition from childhood to adulthood. The purview of the inquiry has been expanded to ask about personal growth in general, leaving the lessons and timing of an applicant's transformation more open-ended. Students are also now free to reflect on a "realization" in addition to an "event" or "occurrence." While a realization that changes your understanding of the world will likely be sparked by a concrete marker (i.e., an event or accomplishment), we are happy to receive the added flexibility from you, Common App. Thank you very much.

There are a few things to note when unpacking this prompt. Keep in mind that the words "accomplishment" and "event" leave themselves open to interpretation; thus, an essay inspired by this question can tackle anything from a formal event to a very small occurrence. A formal event or accomplishment might include anything from obvious landmarks like birthdays

or weddings to achievements like earning an award or receiving a promotion. More informal examples might include something as simple as meeting a special person in your life, taking a car ride, or eating a particularly meaningful meal. We have often found that smaller, less formal events make for more surprising and memorable essays; but as with any of the other prompts, as long as you can answer with originality and put a unique twist on your subject matter, all ideas are fair game.

Your reflection on what you have learned and how you have grown will be a source of great insight for admissions, and you want to make sure your essay highlights the intangible qualities that don't show up anywhere else on an application.

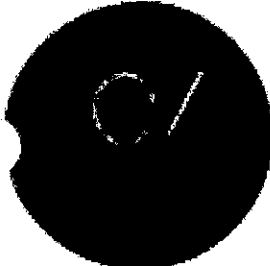
Some other things to consider:

- How do you react to periods of transition? What inspires a change in your perspective?
- When have you had a "eureka" moment, and how has it impacted the way you lived your life thereafter?
- What were the moments in life that fundamentally changed you as a person?
- When did you learn something that made you feel more adult, more capable, more grown up?

For example:

- Did your expansion of a handmade stationery hobby into a full-fledged business give you the motivation and wherewithal to combat the effects of a debilitating illness?
- Have you learned to love the football team playback sessions that force you to routinely examine your mistakes, welcome constructive criticism and point yourself toward self-improvement?
- Did a summer-long role as the U.S. President in a mock government and diplomacy exercise bring out leadership skills you never knew you had?
- What did playing bridge at a senior citizens' home each week show you about the value of enjoyment over competition? How did this change the way you interact and connect with others?

The most important things to keep in mind when searching for these moments are the elements of growth, understanding, and transformation. The event, accomplishment, or realization you discuss should be something that helped you understand the world around you through a different, more mature lens. And, as with Prompt #4, be sure to answer all parts of the question.



PROMPT #6: Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

This was one of the Common App's brand new additions for the 2017-18 application cycle, and we cannot contain our nerdy excitement that it's sticking around for 2018-19, especially since this prompt was built to highlight a student's inner nerd.

One could argue that college is largely about the pursuit of knowledge, so you can imagine it would be quite appealing for an admissions officer to have a meter for your level of self-motivated learning, along with a better understanding of how and why you choose to pay attention to the things that intrigue you. This is a window into your brain: how you process information, how you seek out new sources of content and inspiration. How resourceful are you when your curiosity is piqued to the fullest? The answer to this prompt should also reveal something to admissions about the breadth or depth of your interests. For example, if you're interested in studying astrophysics, you might choose to discuss a concept that shows how far your exploration of the sciences truly reaches. How consumed are you by this passion you are choosing to pursue academically?

Some key questions to consider:

- What floats your boat? Do you have an appetite for knowledge about something specific? Or, as we asked in the breakdown for Prompt #1: what do you love, and why do you love it?
- What lengths have you gone to in order to acquire new information about or experiences related to a topic of interest?
- How do you typically seek to enrich your knowledge when something appeals to

you? Do you have a favorite corner of the library (or internet)? A mentor who is open to answering your burning questions?

- What about the process of learning, especially about subjects that call out to you, is satisfying?

And a few examples to get those wheels turning:

- Did the idea of open source code inspire you to create a tech startup with a few of your friends? What new projects within the company are you most excited to work on?
- Did getting an internship at an accounting firm inspire you to start each day by checking the markets? Do you participate in a mock trading club that allows you to use the expertise you gather from culling through economic news and analysis online and beyond?
- On any given Sunday morning, could we find you lost in the literature of Kurt Vonnegut or immersed in a collection of stories by Isaac Asimov?
- Have you taught yourself to master the compositions of Mozart and Beethoven and break down the songs of Bruno Mars by ear in your spare time?
- Do you have an obsession with pizza so intense it led you to study the culinary arts and keep a pizza journal that documents the 700+ slices you've consumed thus far? (We know someone who did this—really.) How is pizza-making more scientific and/or artistic than the average person realizes?

Whatever you're into, embrace it. Show your feathers. Let your freak flag fly (within reason, obvs). This prompt is about the pursuit of knowledge and your desire to proactively challenge yourself. Whether you are devouring the classics on your Kindle or nerding out over the perfect cheese for calzone-making, your attachment to a subject may inspire admissions to want to learn more about it...and you.

PROMPT #7: Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Last year, it finally happened: the return of the "topic of your choice" (second only to the return of the Jedi). Feared by some, coveted by others, and legendary in its existence; regardless of where you stand on the issue, this was a newsworthy addition to the 2017-18 Common App prompt choices. For years, students have been treating Prompt #1 (which asks about your background, etc.) as topic of your choice *light*—it wasn't exactly the delicious, full-freedom version students were looking for, but they were able to make it work in a pinch. Applicants around the world likely let out a big exhale when they saw they could serve up a big scoop of Prompt #7 to admissions last year. And this year will be no different.

Some questions to consider as you brainstorm, in addition to all of the ones we've posed thus far:

- What do you want admissions to know about you that they wouldn't be able to glean from your transcript, test scores, or teacher recommendations?
- What are the stories that come up over and over again, at the dinner table or in the cafeteria with your friends, that might give admissions some insight into who you are and what is important to you?
- If you had ten minutes alone in a room with an admissions officer, what would you want to talk about or tell him or her about yourself?
- What would you bring to a college campus that no one else would or could?

And a few examples of potential subjects and their related (custom!) prompts:

- Were you born with a congenital eye defect that literally (and metaphorically) affects how you see the world? (*Q: How is your perspective on the world unique?*)
- Do you spend 40 minutes each Friday night tutoring a class of elementary school students in Cambodia? How has that impacted the way you mete out your time and assess your commitments? (*Q: What is the value of 40 minutes?*)

- Did your parents let your older brother choose your name? What was his inspiration? (Please tell us your name is Gaston.) What does your name represent for you? How has it impacted your interactions in the world? (*Q: What's in a name?*)

While being able to write about whatever you wish sounds great in theory, some students find—especially at the beginning of the brainstorming process—that they are debilitated by the "topic of your choice" option because it offers *too much* choice. If that is the case, fear not! Use some of the other prompts as starting points for your brainstorming and free writing journeys. Begin keeping a diary (now!) and jot down subjects, events, and memories as they float to the surface. Now that you have read our handy-dandy prompt guide and understand what admissions is looking for from these prompts, you could very well have a notebook filled with ideas that are ripe for expansion by the time you sit down to write.

So don't worry about having too many ideas, or not having enough ideas, especially at the beginning of the topic selection process. Once you figure out what you'd like to say (and maybe even after you draft the crux of the essay itself), see if your concept fits one of the first six prompts. Trying to tailor your essay to a more specific prompt option may inspire an interesting spin on the story you are trying to tell—one you may not have thought of otherwise. Form influences content. If, after careful consideration, your magic essay topic does not work within the confines of Prompts 1-6, you are in luck. The glorious, all-encompassing Prompt #7 will be here to catch you.

With some brainstorming and hard work, every student can uncover a story worth telling in response to one of these prompts. Remember, admissions wants a glimpse of your personality, your values, your interests and your passions. They want to get an idea of what kind of attitude and energy you will bring to the classroom and campus life.

So take a few minutes to probe your memories, collect your stories and strike up that creative core. Every student has a fabulous essay inside of them – these prompts can help you find yours.