

2014-15 Common Application Essay Prompts

The Common Application will retain the current set of first-year essay prompts for 2014-15, without any edits or additions. The essay length will continue to be capped at 650 words. The feedback received from member colleges and school counselors has been positive. The essay prompts will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that they continue to serve students and member colleges well.

The essay prompts are as follows:

Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?

Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?

Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

- The Common Application does not restrict the number of changes that are made to any part of the application except the essays. Students generally must submit to one college first before they can make changes. They can then add or delete test scores and revise the activity page. However, there are restrictions on changes made to the essay.

- The essay can be revised twice for no more than three revisions. This is a crucial point and one that often gets missed by students. In order to make changes to an essay after you submit an application to a college, students will need to unlock their applications. Students cannot make any changes to an essay once it is submitted to a college. You can unlock again up to a maximum of three revisions. Any remaining colleges would receive your last essay version.

Don't Appear Self-Interested or Materialistic. While few applicants are genuinely altruistic, most colleges are turned off by students who appear more focused on what the school can do for them, rather than how they can benefit from the education and at the same time be a contributing member of the campus community. If you are applying to a business program, the average starting salary of recent graduates should not be your stated motivation for seeking admission!

Don't Rely on Your Computer's Spell Checker. Applicants who rely solely on their computer's spell check program may find themselves submitting applications with poor grammar and word choice. Just because everything is spelled properly doesn't mean it is correct. A good way to catch mistakes is to read your essay very slowly and out loud.

Don't Overlook the Mundane. Some of the best and most memorable essays are based on a simple conversation between people. The impressions and takeaways from such a conversation can be extremely engaging and provide a valuable window into the personality and values of the writer. Some essays of this type center on a moment of enlightenment or illumination when the writer views life from a new perspective and/or gains new confidence.

Skip the Volunteer Trip. Dedicated community service over a period of time can be a strong topic for an application essay. Volunteer day at the local park, or two weeks of school building in Africa, will probably not impress the admissions committee. They see many essays of this type. Not only is it difficult to stand out from the pack, but these experiences are often more about the experience than about you, or convey that money buys opportunity.

Don't Rehash the Resume. The admissions committee relies on essays to learn additional things about you such as your initiative, curiosity about the world, personal growth, willingness to take risks, ability to be self directed, motivation and ability to make the most of a situation. They are interested in your personal qualities such as leadership, confidence, ability to work in a team, strength of character, resilience, sense of humor, ability to get along with others and what you might add to the campus community. In short, use your essays to showcase a side of you not visible from other parts of the application.

The Four Most Common Types of College Essays and How to Approach Them

Essay is not a four-letter word—though you may feel like using a few of your own when it comes time to write one. Most students would rather swim in a vat full of sharks while singing the national anthem than sit down and write an application essay. And hey, we get it. It's easy to shrug off brainstorming, outlining, and agonizing over essay prompts for a Saturday afternoon snooze or four back-to-back episodes of *The Walking Dead*.

These essays should be... fun. They're much more like **narratives**, journal entries, and free form writing than the highly structured, boring **5 paragraph essays** you've probably been writing in school. In fact, some people say they're even easier to write because they're meant to be written in an everyday voice. It should all flow easily once you figure out what you want to write about. *That*, of course, is the hard part: deciding what stuff to write about.

But the nice thing about applying to colleges is that you'll be able to recycle some of the essays you write for different schools, so you'll probably only have to write 3-4 essays at most. Sure, there'll be slight changes here and there and maybe from year to year, but you'll probably be able to use a couple of your essays multiple times. There are always going to be those schools with that weird prompt that doesn't fit into any of these (check out **UChicago**), but even then, odds are you can adapt one of those four into one of the prompts. Most essays can be grouped into **four** general types:

1. The Personal Statement

The Gist: There are a lot of essay prompts that can be considered personal statements; these will range from “Tell us about yourself” to “Tell us about an experience that defines who you are.” An excellent example is the first essay topic choice from the 2013-2014 Common App:

“Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.”

The point of college essays in general is to show a side of you that the admissions committee can't see just by looking at your transcript, letters of rec, resume, and whatnot. The point of personal statement essays in particular is to communicate something you do or did in the past—whatever, really—that defines who you are.

Approach: When choosing a topic for this kind of essay, you should select an experience or activity that played an important—even central—role in your life, but one that isn't covered by the rest of your application. For instance, if most of the awards you won were from mock trial, you had a letter of rec from your mock trial coach, and mock trial filled up half a page on your resume, it might be better to write an essay about something else, unless you provide a story about an intense mock trial that required you to persist under pressure. Remember, the point of the essays is to show the admissions officers something that they can't garner from the rest of your application.

In other words, write about anything. You can write about how singing in the shower has fundamentally changed the way you see things (we're not even kidding, check [this](#) out), about how much you love baking cookies, or just about how much you loved this one art class you took (even if the rest of your application is pretty hardcore math/science). Colleges want multi-dimensional students, so show them something unique about yourself.

2. Your Favorite Activity

Gist: The answer to this prompt can range from competitive math to basketball to debate to a collection of vintage Superman comics. It can also be used for your personal statement as well. The point of this essay is to demonstrate your passion, have a deep intellectual understanding of something, and notice the details that 99.9% of others wouldn't notice—anything that makes you stand out from the crowd.

Approach: Think about what your interests are. What do you do in your free time? If you could spend a day doing something, what would you do? Maybe answering watching TV or playing video games isn't the best idea, unless you happen to run a TV station or have released your own iPhone apps. Think about why it's your favorite activity and what about it gets you excited and just write. A good way to get material for a first draft is to write like you're trying to convince someone how great lacrosse or competitive speed-eating or stamp collections really are. Just remember what you're trying to get across to the people reading your essay: that you truly feel passionate about that activity, and that it brings something out of you that most people can't match up to.

3. Why [insert school name]?

The Gist: This prompt will ask you why you want to spend the next four years of your life at one particular college. Strategically, this essay accomplishes two things: it shows your interest in the school (which is important, because schools want to maintain high matriculation rates), and it shows that you are a good fit for the school.

Approach: To approach this essay, think about how the admissions officers will see you: a potential math major with an interest in Shakespeare, a politics nerd with a photographic memory, an all-around artist with a knack for biology, whatever. Then, do some research. If you're applying as a math major, check out the math department's website. Look up clubs and organizations that you'd like to join at the school. Professors you'd like to work with on their groundbreaking research. In short, you want to communicate to the admissions committee that if you're admitted, you would attend (regardless of whether it's on top of your list or on the bottom; the point is to get in first, then decide where you want to go), and that if you were to attend, you'd contribute positively to the school one way or another.

4. Intellectual Curiosity

Gist: College = freedom at last. True, but let's not forget; you're also in school to study. You'll have to choose something to major in, and most schools will want to know what you like to learn in your free time. An example of this kind of question comes from Stanford's Supplemental Essay questions: Stanford students possess an intellectual vitality. Reflect on an idea or experience that has been important to your intellectual development.

Approach: What are some of your favorite subjects in school? Do you feign a stomachache before math class so you can skip class? Similar to the other three previous essays, think about what characteristics are not yet portrayed through other essays or parts of your application. The admissions committee wants to know that you have a mind that's always hungry for more knowledge.

The people reading your essays are regular human beings, which means you should write with that in mind. A good way to check your tone is to read your essays out loud. No, not in your head, out loud. Read them to a friend, parent, sibling, whatever, and if you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable by the style, then you should change it. This doesn't mean you should add in colloquial filler words like like, um, and uh, but it means that the essay should flow smoothly enough that you feel comfortable reading it out loud in front of someone you don't know very well (don't actually do that, but you should feel good enough to).

And... have fun. A lot of people think of college essays as a tedious chore, but actually, they're a valuable experience to learn more about yourself and at the same time shake off the modesty a bit and brag to someone whose job it is to listen.

Introduction

Fact that grabs audience attention
Background/history of issue/problem/topic
Thesis statement

Current state of issue/problem/topic

- Topic/claim sentence: Make a claim that explains what the paragraph is about
- Evidence that supports/explains the claim (this is often research from secondary sources)
- Analysis that explains how the evidence supports your claim and why this matters to the paper's thesis statement
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The need for a solution or course of action

- Topic/claim
- Evidence
- Analysis
- Possible solution
- Topic/claim
- Evidence
- Analysis

Conclusion

- What might happen now?
- Is a solution likely?
- What's the future of the issue?

Your outline will contain more detailed information, and if there are certain areas that the assignment requires you to cover, then you can modify the outline to include these. You can also expand it if you're writing a longer research paper: the discussion of the problem might need several paragraphs, for example, and you might discuss the pros and cons of several possible solutions.