



The College Essay

Tips for writing the college essay and supplemental responses



The Common Application

- Nearly 900 member institutions.
- Common Application essay prompts are often released as early as January of the students' junior year of high school.
- Word limit of 650 words.

2020 – 2021 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.



The Coalition Application

- Over 140 member institutions
- Overlaps with many Common Application schools.
- All Coalition member schools graduate students with low-to-no debt, while either meeting students' full demonstrated financial need, offering low-cost in-state tuition, or providing responsible financial aid packages.
- Per Coalition: "recommend that you aim for 500 to 550 words"

2020 – 2021 Essay Prompts

1. Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it. (UW Required)
 2. Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution.
 3. Has there been a time when you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs?
 4. What is the hardest part of being a student now? What's the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (assuming they would listen to you)?
 5. Submit an essay on a topic of your choice.
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The ***Common Application*** and ***Coalition for College*** have each added a question relating to Covid-19 and how this 'disruption' may have affected the student in regard to their studies, health, well-being, reliable access to technology, etc. For each application, the question is **OPTIONAL**. However, the Common Application word limit is 250 words while the Coalition is 300 words. For colleges that are not members of either of these application platforms, I expect that some will include similar questions on their own applications.



The University of California – Personal Insight Questions

- There are eight questions from which to choose. Students respond to only 4 of the 8 questions.
- Each response is limited to a maximum of 350 words.
- The UC application provides “things to consider” statements after each question to help guide students along the way.

1. Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes or contributed to group efforts over time.
 2. Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.
 3. What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?
 4. Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.
 5. Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?
 6. Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.
 7. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?
 8. Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?
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What ARE Colleges Looking For In An Essay?

- Consider the college essay as a short story about a moment in your life
- Make it interesting!
- Will your opening statement capture the reader's attention or immediately elicit a yawn?



**Typical student
writing their
college app essay**



**Typical admission
counselor reading
a college app essay**

After reading each statement below which essay would want you to learn more about the writer?

1. *I learned a lot about myself last summer as a counselor at Camp Sambica.*
2. *When it rains, the inhabitants where I live are the last to know. Welcome to Short People Land.*



What Are Colleges Looking For In An Essay? Cont...

➤ Answer the question

- Duquesne University Health Profession applicant: “Why do you want to be a health care professional?”
 - They are not asking you about a book you’ve read, an obstacle you’ve overcome, a lesson learned, etc. (unless pertinent to the question)

➤ And differentiate yourself...

- “I want to help people” will not provide any additional insight between you and any other health profession applicant.
- Colleges want to know something genuine about the applicant that shows reflection and/or growth. We want to know what the student wants us to know beyond grades, test scores, and the general activities section of the application.



What Are Colleges Looking For In An Essay? Cont...

- The closing paragraph is important too.
 - Leave the reader wanting more

“My residency in Short People Land has shaped my capacity for diligence, camaraderie, empathy, and laughter. Thanks to my height, I have nearly everything required to attack the ordeals of life and still maintain sanity. Neither have I lost respect for the people up there, so please do not hesitate to bend down. I’ll meet you in the Land Down Here.”

Karen A. Lee
College Essays That
Made A Difference
Princeton Review – 5th Ed



Tips On Writing The College Essay

- Complete the essay over the summer.
 - The essay prompts are often available by January or early spring of junior year
 - Given the amount of time spent on the essay, it is often the lengthiest portion of the college application
 - Less stress
 - Fewer distractions (exams, homework, school activities – sports, clubs, etc.)
 - Brainstorm. Read each essay prompt individually. Do any of them elicit an immediate idea worth exploring?
 - Write, write, write. Although the essay max is generally no longer than 500 – 650 words, keep your thoughts flowing freely. Do not stop to edit – that will come later in the process.
 - Be honest and sincere.
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Tips, Cont...

- Be reflective don't "tell."
 - Be descriptive. A good essay uses all five senses and makes the reader feel as if they were there. Examples:
 - I could taste the saltwater and seaweed in my mouth
 - I could hear every hollow ring of the bell
 - The cold made my skin feel numb and worn
 - The room smelled like gingerbread men and vanilla icing
 - Don't ask yourself what you think the college wants to hear. Just be yourself.
 - If you are not funny, don't try to be funny. It generally won't go well...
 - Don't be afraid to brag.
 - Write 500 words max. Many schools say a well written essay can/should be done in 300 – 400 words.
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What Not To Do

- Don't begin the essay introducing yourself.
 - Don't reiterate extracurricular activities in list format or rehash activities already in your resume.
 - Don't discuss several topics in one essay. Stay focused.
 - Don't reuse essays in the same application.
 - Don't talk about someone else in detail. Remember, the school wants to learn more about you, not your grandparent...
 - Try not to write on topics likely to be written by others: winning the state championship, summer camp counselor, volunteer activities, etc. – unless you can truly personalize your experience.
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Don't Forget To...

- Review – check for misspellings, punctuation: and Capitalization.
- Check for content
 - “I was so excited to finally be a candy stripper at the UCLA Medical Center.”
 - “I recall with great fondness the many hours my brother and I spent hunting peasants.”
 - “I never personally experienced death until my grandfather died.”
 - “I have made the horror role every semester.”
- Have another set of eyes review the essay – preferably someone who has not read it yet. However, the reviewer should be careful not to provide *too much* insight (parents...)



Supplemental Essays

➤ Supplemental essays often focus on college specific questions

- Why us? What qualities of the college/university make it a good fit for the student applying?
 - Carnegie Mellon University: *Please submit a one page, single-spaced essay that explains why you have chosen Carnegie Mellon and your particular major(s), department(s) or program(s). This essay should include the reasons why you've chosen the major(s), any goals or relevant work plans and any other information you would like us to know. For freshmen applying to more than one college or program, please mention each college or program to which you are applying. Because our admission committees review applicants by college and program, **your essay can impact our final decision**. (2018)*
- Diversity is a buzz word on many college campuses and often a topic to be covered in a college application. Students should be prepared for this.
 - University of Washington: *Our families and communities often define us and our individual worlds. Community might refer to your cultural group, extended family, religious group, neighborhood or school, sports team or club, co-workers, etc. Describe the world you come from and how you, as a product of it, might add to the diversity of the University of Washington. (2020)*



Supplemental Essays, Cont...

- “Anything else you wish to share?” questions.
 - If a student has some bad grades caused by circumstances beyond their control, this is a good place to discuss those issues.
- Supplemental essays listed as “optional” should be considered “required.”
- A student applying to ‘only’ five colleges can expect to answer as many as 8 – 10 essays / supplemental questions or more, particularly for private and more selective colleges.



THANK YOU!



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