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The Common Application Announces 2017-2018 Essay Prompts

We are pleased to share the 2017-2018 Common Application essay prompts with you. The changes you see below reflect the feedback of 108 Common App member colleges and more than 5,000 other Common App constituents, as well as consultation with our advisory committees and Board of Directors. Students represented the single largest share of constituent survey respondents (59%), followed by school counselors (23%), and teachers (11%).

We were gratified to learn that 91% of members and 90% of constituents agree or strongly agree that the current prompts are effective. In addition, the narrative comments we received helped us see areas for improvement in three of the prompts. Working in close consultation with the counselors and admission officers on our advisory committees, we revised these prompts in a way that we believe will help students see expanded opportunities for expressing themselves. Those revisions appear in italics. You will also notice two new prompts. The first asks students to share examples of their intellectual curiosity. The second is a return to inviting students to submit an essay on a topic of their choice, reframed to help students understand that they are welcome to draw inspiration from multiple sources, not just their own creativity.

The word limit on the essay will remain at 650.

The goal of these revisions is to help all applicants, regardless of background or access to counseling, see themselves and their stories within the prompts. They are designed to invite unencumbered discussions of character and community, identity, and aspiration. To this end, we will be creating new educational resources to help students both understand and approach the opportunities the essay presents for them.

2017-2018 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. [No change]
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? [Revised]
3. Reflect on a time when you *questioned* or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your *thinking*? What *was the outcome*? [Revised]
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. [No change]
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or *realization* that *sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others*. [Revised]
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?* [New]
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.* [New]

The Common App Essay Prompts Are Changing. Here's Why It Doesn't Matter.

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After a month-long survey that captured the feedback of over 5000 individuals—more than half of them students—The Common Application has released its [2017-2018 essay prompts](#). For those of you who will be applying to college next year, here's a closer look at what's changing—and, more importantly, what's not.

For starters, the current prompts remain more or less intact. That's intentional, for two reasons. First, over 90% of the survey respondents told us that the prompts work well. Second, we recognize that continuity is important. In the words of one school counselor we spoke to, “In a year when so much has changed, it would be nice to have something that stays the same.”

At the same time, we want to make sure that the prompts remain as effective as possible, and that means helping you see each one for the full opportunity it presents. To give an example, one of the current prompts asks you to describe a time when you've experienced failure. The intent of the prompt has always been to help you reflect on how you deal with unexpected complications and disappointments, since that insight can be incredibly revealing. But for too many of you, that word—*failure*—can freeze you in your tracks.

The solution turned out to be a slight rewording that asks you to think more broadly about challenges and setbacks, not just failure. We've taken this same approach with two other prompts, revising them to expand your thinking while still retaining their original spirit. (There's also an argument to be made that getting cut from the soccer team isn't really failure, but that's a different article.)

The other two changes you'll see are additions to the line-up. First, there's a new prompt that invites you to discuss your curiosity, and the counselors and admission officers we've spoken to are excited to see where you take it. Second, you'll find the return of an explicit invitation to write an essay on a topic of your choice, a change that may have some of you celebrating the freedom to write anything you want.

But here is what hasn't changed: the instructions. Which essentially tell you to write anything you want.

The Common App essay prompts have one purpose: to help you introduce yourself to your colleges. (Yes, showcasing your writing ability is part of the equation, but that's the role of the essay itself, not the prompts.) That's why the instructions are at least as important as the prompts themselves. Here's what they say:

“What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response.”

In a sense, the entire essay exercise boils down to that one leading question: What do you want the readers of your application to know about you? This is not a trick question. The ball is fully in your court and always has been. What you write is entirely up to you. So write about yourself—about what you love, where you come from, what you aspire to, how you spend your time, what bugs you, what inspires you, who is important in your life.

In other words: Write an essay on a topic of your choice.

Back in 2013, the Common App introduced a brand new set of essay prompts for the first time in years. People knew the changes were coming because the organization had forecast them months in advance. As soon as the new prompts were published, counselors and writing coaches took to the internet to analyze and unpack and advise. It's not a stretch to say that there may have been more articles written about college essays that year than there were college essays themselves.

Of all the advice published, [one article stood above the rest](#) [see the article that follows]. In it, Alice Kleeman, a college advisor from Menlo-Atherton High School in California, turned what was then five prompts into forty-five by posing nine guiding questions for each, using three lenses: academic, extracurricular, and personal. "These are just suggestions," she explained, "designed to jumpstart your thinking, provide a gentle nudge if you feel stumped, and to help you decide which prompt might provide the best opportunity for you to show the admission office who you are."

Ms. Kleeman's article remains a master class in how to approach the Common App essay. She would argue that the prompts tell you *how* to write, not *what* to write. Without them, the charge is "Write whatever you want." With them, it becomes "Write whatever you want, but go in this direction."

And that brings us to a question: If the prompts afford so much flexibility, what's the point in resurrecting *Topic of your choice*?

Simply put: you're busy. Applying to college is no small undertaking, and for most of you, the essay—or essays, depending on where you apply—will be the most time consuming task. So use *Topic of your choice* to reduce your stress, not add to it. If you've already written something that you're especially proud of, then share it. If a specific college uses an essay prompt that sings to you, then use it here. (As a [LEED](#) Platinum office, the Common App is a big believer in recycling.) But *Topic of your choice* doesn't mean *default choice*. If the unfocused charge to simply "write anything" seems overwhelming, then let the prompts guide you when you're ready to start writing.

Except you're not ready to start writing.

It's February of your junior year. The odds are high that the story you'll eventually tell in your essay hasn't even happened yet. The prompts weren't released this early to get you writing. They were released to get you thinking—about yourself, about what is important to you, about the interests and experiences and talents and relationships that reveal who you are. So think as hard as you want. Maybe take some notes. But don't write anything. Not yet.

As you think, don't forget how much freedom and control you have over what you will eventually write. Remember that question from the instructions: *what do you want the readers of of [sic] your application to know about you?* The irony of essay prompts is that they are equally helpful and irrelevant. What truly matters is the story you want to tell about yourself.

Effective essay prompts don't dictate the plotline. They inspire the storyteller.

Now go find your story.

***Note that this article was written in 2013, but it still contains helpful advice for this year's prompts.**

Advice for Students on Topics for the New Common App Essays

Posted on Fri, 02/15/2013 - 07:13

College advisor Alice Kleeman joins us today in our ongoing series on the changes to the Common Application with some excellent guidance for students and how to think about the new essay prompts and an entertaining look back on some of the essays that have been favorites in her twenty years advising students.

The five prompts that will appear on the "new" Common Application should allow for nearly any topic you might choose. Below are some suggestions for academic, extracurricular, and personal topics that might fit neatly into a response for each prompt. Of course, these are just suggestions, designed to jumpstart your thinking, provide a gentle nudge if you feel stumped, and to help you decide which prompt might provide the best opportunity for you to show the admission office who you are. Your response to any college-essay prompt should be entirely personal and one that only you could write; these examples are just to get your essay juices flowing!

Essay Prompt One:

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.

Key Words:

"background," "story," "identity," "incomplete without"

Possible topics:

ACADEMIC:

- Have you moved from one school to another in order to pursue greater academic opportunities?
- Has your pursuit of academics been influenced by your parents' lack of formal education?
- Is your dedication to a particular academic area shaped by your life experiences (for example, has your interest in medicine stemmed from growing up with a sibling with chronic illness?)?

EXTRACURRICULAR:

- Is your identity entirely tied up in the music you've been composing and playing since you were five?
- Has your ethnic background led you to participate deeply and fully in the dance, spiritual, or culinary traditions of your culture?
- Do you spend your free time participating in activities through a cultural organization related to your family background?

PERSONAL:

- Do you come from a bicultural family? Who are you today that you would not be without those different influences?
- Have you grown up in a family that has been challenged by poverty, illness, or other obstacles? How has this influenced your identity?
- Have your extended family's values been transmitted to you in a unique and particularly powerful way over the years?

Essay Prompt Two:

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

Key words:

"incident," "failure," "effect on you," "lessons learned"

If you choose this prompt, after describing the "failure," be sure to show the positive changes that emerged from the situation!

Possible topics:

ACADEMIC:

- Did you challenge yourself in an academic area that is not usually your forte, and find that it didn't go the way you hoped it might?
- Did you seek a summer internship in an academic area you thought you'd like to explore more deeply, and find that you weren't engaged in the way you wished?
- Have you submitted your writing, art, or lab results to a professional journal for publication, and received your first rejection letter? Or have you received what seemed to be negative feedback from a teacher and had to approach the subject in a new way?

EXTRACURRICULAR:

- Did you believe that the serious injury you experienced in your sophomore year would derail your athletic career? Or did you fail to make the team in your sport of choice?
- Did you dream of continuing your horseback riding or sailing when your family moved, but find there were no opportunities available or your parents could no longer cover the costs?
- Did it seem like a great idea for you to follow in the footsteps of an older sibling and participate in his or her activities of choice, but then learn it didn't work out so well for you?

PERSONAL:

- Did you challenge yourself to a resolution, goal, or personal promise, and find you weren't able to stick with it?
- Did you make an effort to reach out to people you hoped would become your friends, only to find they didn't welcome you?
- Have you ever taken a close look at your character traits and personal qualities and hoped to make fundamental changes, but then realized those traits and qualities were inextricably tied to who you are?

Essay Prompt Three:

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

Key words:

"challenged," "belief or idea," "prompted," "same decision"

Possible topics:

ACADEMIC:

- Did you decide to offer a different-from-the-accepted and possibly unpopular perspective in your English or history class? Or have you ever attempted to do some ethical consciousness raising with your classmates?
- Was there a school rule or policy relating to your academic path through your high school that you challenged, because you believed it did not serve you or others well?
- Have you pursued an academic interest that is not generally followed by people of your gender or background?

EXTRACURRICULAR:

- When you learned that certain students were being bullied or excluded from an activity at your school, did you tackle the inequity?
- Were you ever told by a coach or activity director that you would not be successful in a particular activity, yet you chose to pursue it?
- Have your parents felt you couldn't handle a new passion on top of your other commitments, leading you to seek ways to manage your time so you could prove your ability to balance your busy schedule?

PERSONAL:

- Have you begun to question the precepts of your religious or cultural upbringing?
- Are you resisting the pressure in your community to do it all—and do it all perfectly—and instead are seeking balance in your life?
- Have you ever made a well-thought-out effort to convince your parents to give you more independence and freedom?

Essay Prompt Four:

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

Key words:

place or environment, "content," "do or experience," "meaningful"

Possible topics:

ACADEMIC:

- Has a cozy corner of the local bookstore or school library become your happy place?
- Have you made the chemistry lab your home away from home?
- Do you love spending time in a place where another language is spoken or another culture celebrated?

EXTRACURRICULAR:

- Is the badminton court, robotics workshop, or practice hall for your youth orchestra the place where you feel most in your element?
- Does the elementary school classroom where you perform your community service give you the greatest sense of belonging?
- Do you feel your strongest sense of ownership at work, whether it's the ice-cream parlor, hardware store, or coffee shop?

PERSONAL:

- Is there a leafy tree in your backyard that you gravitate to when you want to read and think?
- Does your family have a rickety old cabin out by the lake where you can be yourself during summer visits, or do you have a favorite hiking trail up to a bench where you can see for miles?
- Have you tailored your bedroom to reflect your personality and suit your every need so it's the one place where you can be the essential you?

Essay Prompt Five:

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

Key words:

"accomplishment/event," "formal/informal," "transition to adulthood," "culture, community, family"

Possible topics:

ACADEMIC:

- Did you make your government and economics education come alive by registering to vote on your 18th birthday?
- Have you taken a class on a college campus, and lived the life of a college student during that time, or taken an internship where you've worked as an equal with a group of adults?
- Did you become a U.S. citizen and experience studying for and taking the test, and the ceremony that goes along with that milestone?

EXTRACURRICULAR:

- Has your talent allowed you to participate at such a high level that your teammates, band-mates, or co-workers are all adults, and they treat you as such?
- Has one of your activities taken you out of your own community, so you learned to travel and cope with new situations on your own?
- Did you come up with the funding for your most meaningful activity on your own, so you've assumed a heightened level of adult responsibility and appreciated the activity all the more for your independence in making it happen?

PERSONAL:

- Does your family rely on you for adult responsibilities such as childcare for siblings, translation, transportation, or housework?
- Have you taken on financial responsibilities to help support your family?
- Do you come from a single-parent family where you play a role as the man/woman of the house, with all its attendant responsibilities?

SOME OF MY FAVORITE COLLEGE ESSAYS

As I noted earlier, your response to any college-essay prompt should be entirely personal. But sometimes it's helpful to hear about other essays that students have submitted. Do remember, though, that the most important thing about the essay is that it should be something only you could write! Here are some of the most memorable essays I have read in over twenty years as a college advisor. You'll see that they paint a vivid and personal picture of the writer.

My all-time favorite college essay was a student's account of his work at the local hardware store, and what it meant to him to take care of people's basic home-and-garden needs. It was simple and straightforward; I knew him well by the time I finished reading the essay.

A similar topic, another student's after-school job, began, "Working in a library today is not for the faint of heart." Really? I can't wait to know why! An essay that began with "I am amazed by what I have learned about myself from children" was a superb and telling little gem about an unexpected experience with young children already feeling academic pressure. Another great essay began with, "It is strange to be grateful for a fractured skull." Don't you want to read on?

Another student wrote about her love of ... triangles! Yet another focused on the student's life-long love of reading. A lover of art history who volunteered at the Rodin Sculpture Garden began her essay, "If I'm not at school or at home, I'm likely to be found working behind the gates of hell." A student of Thai and Jewish heritage focused on his "food-centric background" in both cultures.

And finally, who could resist an essay (about a student's family forays into intellectual curiosity and experimentation) that began, "The baking sheet slides into the oven, pushed by my mother's careful hands—and on it rest a dozen wadded-up balls of Kleenex, half fresh, half used." All of the above essays could fit neatly into one or another of the Common App prompts!

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<http://collegeadmissionbook.com/blog/advice-students-topics-new-common-app-essays>