

APPLICATION ESSAYS

The personal essay, or personal statement, is important, representing a central part of your application. It is your opportunity to bring you—the person behind those academic credentials and extracurricular achievements—to life and demonstrate what you might bring to a college community.

What should I write about?

Yourself! Your essay needs to reveal something meaningful to the colleges about you, your interests, how you relate to others, and/or how you think.

How do I start?

Rather than starting with the specific personal essay prompts, identify what it is about yourself that you want the colleges to know, then decide how you will demonstrate that point. You can start by asking yourself probing questions about your life that might best answer one or more of the suggested essay topics. The answers to some of these questions will bring to mind a story or anecdote that you can bring to life through vivid details and this, in turn, will show the reader your goals, interests, values, and how you think. Your examples should be current or recent. If you describe an event from when you were a child, you should explain how that shaped who you are today or what fascinates you today. College admissions readers want to know who you are now.

Questions to get you thinking could be: what experiences in your life made you uncomfortable and how did you deal with them? Looking back, what experiences stand out the most? Why? Who has had the greatest influence on you and how and why? Have you ever had an experience that led to an epiphany that changed how you view yourself or the world? What difficulties have you faced and how have you overcome them? When have you been happiest, surprised, or moved? What did you learn? What academic or intellectual experiences have inspired you or changed how you view the world and/or your role within it?

Concentrate on one or two ideas at most to give the essay depth. It is more effective to elaborate on one key idea, rather than trying to communicate a list of your attributes. If you try to include too many different concepts, you risk diluting your message and creating a superficial impression.

Give specific and current anecdotal examples of the points you are trying to make. Show, don't tell!

Be sure that you answer the question to which you are responding, if you are responding to a more specific prompt rather than "Topic of Your Choice"; keep your essay focused and give the reader a conclusion in a sentence or two which will emphasize an important thought or idea that creates a lasting impression of you.

Work on your essay and then let it sit. This will give you a chance to re-read it with fresh eyes. Once you have developed it to the point where you are satisfied with it (and have proofread it), send it to us for comments. Our feedback will focus on clarification of content and style. Our counselors will provide the type of objective scrutiny that you will receive from admissions committees. We will, however, ensure that your voice remains throughout and that you have the final word. It is your essay!

What you should do in your personal essay:

Share credit with others, while modestly showing what you do to contribute. Other people, your guidance counselor or teachers, can tell admissions officers how great you are. Your topic does not need to be dramatic, grand, or terribly humorous. It needs to be crisp, clear, and reveal who you are and how you think. If you are writing about how a person has influenced you, do not get lost in describing the person. Focus more on **how** that person impacted you. Expression matters; proofread your work many times.

Get your reader's attention and get to your point. There is no need to waste words on introductory or summary paragraphs. The college application essay is not a typical five-paragraph essay, so do not describe what you are going to write about and then repeat it at the end. Your goal is to grab the reader's attention and hold it. Be careful if writing about potentially controversial issues (politics, humor, religion, race, etc.) as you don't know who will be reading your essay; it's fine to express an opinion but it is also important to communicate tolerance for a diversity of opinions. Most applications will have a word limit, so every word matters.

What you should not do:

While you want your essay to be honest and true, you should never put anyone down or blame anyone for your actions. Limit any negative thoughts or images and be sure to ultimately present an optimistic and positive attitude. Be careful not to exaggerate or compare yourself to others. Avoid superlatives. When talking about your accomplishments, use "we" at least as often as you use "I." Avoid having your essay sound like a resume or a list of accomplishments; the goal is to enhance your reader's understanding of who you are by providing some context. The accomplishments should all appear elsewhere in your application in the Activities or Honors and Awards sections.

Personal Essay Topics

We always recommend writing on a topic that you feel highlights something specific about you that you want your admissions readers to know. If your chosen topic fits within the framework of one of the first six prompts offered on the Common Application, great; if not, then simply select #7 ("topic of your choice"). Here are the current prompts for the Common Application:

- 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 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?
- Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- 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.
- Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- 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?
- 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 Personal Essay has a 650 word limit.

Colleges that do not accept the Common Application may differ in the personal essay topic options they offer. Regardless of what your topic is, your essay should shed some light on who you are as a person, what you value, or what makes you different. Keep in mind to whom you are writing, remembering they don't know you, and help them more fully understand who you are as an applicant to their college or university.

Additional Information

The Common Application also includes an Additional Information section. It is NOT to be used as an opportunity to add another essay of your choice and doing so can be viewed negatively by admissions readers. It is specifically designed for you to add context as necessary, perhaps disclosing a learning difference, explaining a specific obstacle you and/or your family have faced that has had an impact on your academics, adding detail about an activity that doesn't fit in the Activities section, or adding additional testing credentials that don't fit in the spaces allocated. Other opportunities will open up in the application if you need to discuss a move from one secondary school to another or a disciplinary issue. For fall 2020, the Common Application will also include an optional essay to describe how Covid-19 has affected you and/or your family.

Essays in Supplements

Here are a few examples of supplemental essay topics taken from actual college applications:

- Tell us about something that is meaningful to you and why. (Stanford)
- Everyone belongs to many different communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, ethnicity, income, cuisine, interest, race, ideology, or intellectual heritage. Choose one of the communities to which you belong, and describe that community and your place within it. (University of Michigan)
- What work of art, music, science, mathematics, or literature has surprised, unsettled, or challenged you, and in what way? (University of Virginia)
- Reflecting on your involvement throughout high school or within the community, how have you engaged with one of Pitzer's core values? (Pitzer)

Some colleges have distinctive essay prompts, which necessitate a unique approach; the best-known of these is the University of Chicago. Recent prompts included the following:

- Due to a series of clerical errors, there is exactly one typo (an extra letter, a removed letter, or an altered letter) in the name of every department at the University of Chicago. Oops! Describe your new intended major. Why are you interested in it and what courses or areas of focus within it might you want to explore? Potential options include Commuter Science, Bromance Languages and Literatures, Pundamentals: Issues and Texts, Ant History... a full list of unmodified majors ready for your editor's eye is available here: <https://collegeadmissions.uchicago.edu/academics/majors-minors>.
—*Inspired by Josh Kaufman, Class of 2018*
- Earth. Fire. Wind. Water. Heart! Captain Planet supposes that the world is made up of these five elements. We're familiar with the previously-noted set and with actual elements like hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon, but select and explain another small group of things (say, under five) that you believe compose our world.
—*Inspired by Dani Plung, Class of 2017*

How you react to prompts like these can tell you a lot about whether or not this college would be a good fit for you. If you find the prompts annoying or exasperating, then this college may not be a great fit; if you find them fun and even look forward to writing them, then this may be a perfect fit!

You are likely to come across many prompts which ask some version of “how will you explore your specific interests on our campus?” If you cannot answer that question after thoroughly researching the college or university's offerings and resources, then perhaps you should not be applying there.

In sum, engaging with a college's application supplement is often a means of engaging with the college or university itself and you should pay close attention to whether that engagement is a good fit for you.

“Optional” Essays

If you are given the opportunity to write an optional essay, write it! Don't waste an opportunity to tell the college more about yourself. Admissions officers want to know how maturely you think and what is most important to you. Every essay is an opportunity to connect with your readers. The more they feel they know you, the better chance you have of being accepted. The essays are where they hear directly from you.