

The Application Essay/ Personal Insight Questions

Take a sheet of questions and begin answering them with one or two word answers as quickly as you can. If you have to think more than 5 seconds to come up with an answer, skip the question. You are not turning this in, so go ahead and get personal!

What to they want from you???

Northeastern University:

“If the admissions essay were meant for applicants to list all their awards and qualifications, it would be called a resume. The essay is more of an opportunity for the applicant to share their character, unique passions and interests, and meaningful experiences.”

NYU:

“The essay is your forum to tell an admissions officer and committee a story. Talk about you as person and the life experiences you’ve had.”

UC Berkeley:

“Thoughtfully describe not only what you’ve done, but also the choices you have made and what you have gained as a result.”

Values

Choose ten values from the list provided that are most important to you.

Now underline your top five.

Now circle your top three.

Keep it Original

Use **EXTREME** Caution with the following topics:

- 1. Listing accomplishments.**
- 2. Sports.**
- 3. Sharing how lucky you are.**
- 4. Writing an "un-essay."**
- 5. Inflammatory topics.**
- 6. Illegal activity.**
- 7. Do-good experiences.**
- 8. The most important thing or person in my life.**
- 9. Death, divorce, tragedies.**
- 10. Humor**

What do I Want Colleges to Know

Create a list of things you want colleges to know about you with two columns. In the first column list the experiences you've had that you want to share with colleges and in the second column, list the values you hold that you want to share with colleges.

Draw a line from each value to an experience that shows the value.

Voice

Spend 5 minutes writing about everything you did before school this morning. Be as detailed as possible and write EXACTLY how you would speak if you were telling a friend. This should not be a list.

Example:

I woke up when my alarm went off this morning. I thought it seemed lighter out than usual even though I was getting up early so that I could wash my hair, which I hate doing in the morning because it is just too early for the noise of the blow dryer. But I was too lazy to do it last night so I laid there regretting my decision. It was cold this morning and I didn't want to get out of bed. I heard the heater turn on and decided to lay there for a few more minutes while my room heated up.....

Tips

- Don't try to impress. Be sincere and write in your voice.
- Although you should have an organized statement, this is not a research paper and doesn't require introduction, body, conclusion, etc.
- Write to share the emotions of your passion.
- Embrace this opportunity for the readers to “meet” you. You want them to feel as though they know you.

Caution

- Don't use offensive language
- Be careful with humor and sarcasm
- Avoid being “cute” or “perky”
- Don't write about another person!
- Although you need to showcase the best aspects of you, be careful not to BRAG!

Common Pitfalls

FLUFF

I have to admit that theater did not come naturally to me, and I remember feeling remarkably self-conscious and nervous the first few times I set foot on stage. The first time I was on stage was in the eighth grade when my best friend talked me into auditioning for our school's performance of the play Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare.

Better

Theater did not come naturally to me, and I felt remarkably self-conscious and nervous when I first set foot on stage to audition for Romeo and Juliet in the eighth grade.

The length of your essay is limited and you want your words to be impactful, not filler.

Common Pitfalls

Vague

I like a lot of things about basketball. For one, the activity allows me to develop abilities that will help me in my future endeavors.

Better

Not only do I find basketball fun, but the sport has helped me develop my leadership and communication skills, as well as my ability to work with a team. As a result, my love of basketball will make me a better business major.

Avoid words like “stuff”, “things”, “aspects”, “society”, etc.. They leave the reader guessing. Your essay should answer questions, not create them.

Common Pitfalls

Clichés

My brother is one in a million. If given a responsibility, he never falls asleep at the wheel. When others fail, he is not one to make a mountain out of a molehill. To make a long story short, throughout high school I have tried to emulate my older brother and I credit him with many of my own successes.

Better

Throughout high school, I have tried to emulate my brother. He takes his responsibilities seriously, yet he is generous when dealing with the shortcomings of others. This combination of reliability and graciousness makes others turn to him for leadership. My own successes in high school are due largely to my brother's example.

Clichés diminish the essay's message and reveal the author's lack of creativity. For the same reason, avoid quoting others.

Common Pitfalls

Verbose

The game was spectacularly wonderful. I didn't score the defining goal, but I did manage dexterously to pass the ball to my amazingly talented teammate who adroitly kicked it between the goalie's desperately reaching fingers and the rigid frame of the right-hand corner of the goal.

Better

The game was close. I won't receive credit for our win, but I did pass the ball to my teammate who scored the winning goal when he shot the ball through the narrow space between the goalie's hands and the upper corner of the goal post.

Strong verbs, not adjectives and adverbs, make your essay come to life. Two or three adjectives or adverbs in every sentence, are indications of an immature writer who is trying too hard to impress the reader.

Structure

Adapted from www.collegeessayguy.com

Your application essay or personal insight questions need to tell a story about you which include specific examples from your life.

The most common ways to structure your essay are **The Narrative** and **The Montage** approach.

The Narrative

Focus is on ONE story at one place in time, and tell us who you are at the end of it. You go DEEP into one story to show some deep personal change.

Follow this format:

Status Quo: *Who were you before this event?*

Inciting Incident/Change: *What happened to change it all?*

Raise the stakes: *How did the plot thicken?*

Moment of Truth: *What sudden epiphany did you have about yourself, others, or the world?*

Outcome/New Status Quo: *Who are you now? What's different about you? Why does it matter?*

The Montage

Focus on stitching together two or three different stories and moments, revealing who you are over time. You go WIDE across your life to show shifts in perspective and deep personal change.

Sample Formats

These can be adapted to as many “stories” as you would like to incorporate

Chronological

Share story 1

Shift to story 2

Shift to story 3

Reflection about yourself

Flashback

Start story 2

Flashback to story 1

Finish up story 2

Reflection about yourself

The Prompts

2017-2018 Common App

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.
This is the wide open “Choose Your Own Adventure 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?

Be careful not to choose failures that may seem trite (failure to get an A on an exam and/or secure tickets to a concert), or that illustrate a lapse in good judgment (risky, illegal). Try to keep your story as positive as possible and remember that this should be less about the failure and more about how you learned and grew from your experience.

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

This prompt requires a balancing act. You must have a very specific opinion or voice, but you need to be careful to keep it within the word count, don't get “preachy” and don't alienate your reader. Be sure to share why this was important to you on a fundamental level of morals and values. You should be answering WHY a lot with this prompt.

The Prompts

2017-2018 Common App

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.

Think about everything from more traditional obstacles you've had to overcome to the small predicaments that have inspired you to think about what you really value. Consider some of the same tips from #2 in regards to experiences to write about.

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

Sometimes 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, formal and informal, big and small, are fair game. Keep in mind elements transition and transformation. The event or accomplishment you discuss should be something that helped you understand the world around you through a different, more mature lens.

The Prompts

2017-2018 Common App 2 New Prompts This Year!

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 Personal Insight Questions

Prompt 1: Leadership

- 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. (aka The Time I Led or Helped A Group)*

From the UC:

Things to consider: A leadership role can mean more than just a title. It can mean being a mentor to others, acting as the person in charge of a specific task, or a taking lead role in organizing an event or project. Think about your accomplishments and what you learned from the experience.

What were your responsibilities? Did you lead a team? How did your experience change your perspective on leading others? Did you help to resolve an important dispute at your school, church in your community or an organization? And your leadership role doesn't necessarily have to be limited to school activities. For example, do you help out or take care of your family?

Be sure to consider ALL of this question. Do not just describe a leadership role. How did you manage conflict or communicate clearly? How did you practice perspective taking and empathy? How did you foster kindness, harmony, forgiveness, unity and teamwork?

The Personal Insight Questions

Prompt 2: Creativity

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. (aka The Time I Created/ Did Something Cool That I Came Up With All By Myself)

From the UC:

Things to consider: What does creativity mean to you? Do you have a creative skill that is important to you? What have you been able to do with that skill? If you used creativity to solve a problem, what was your solution? What are the steps you took to solve the problem?

How does your creativity influence your decisions inside or outside the classroom?
Does your creativity relate to your major or a future career?

What inspired you to create something new? How did you go about it? Was it successful-why or why not?

Why is it important to you to express your creative side? How does being creative make you feel?

The Personal Insight Questions

Prompt 3: Talent or Skill

3. *What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time? (aka The Time I Showcased My Special Skill)*

From the UC:

Things to consider: If there's a talent or skill that you're proud of, this is the time to share it. You don't necessarily have to be recognized or have received awards for your talent (although if you did and you want to talk about, feel free to do so). Why is this talent or skill meaningful to you?

Does the talent come naturally or have you worked hard to develop this skill or talent? Does your talent or skill allow you opportunities in or outside the classroom? If so, what are they and how do they fit into your schedule?

What started your interest in this skill and why did you keep on doing it? How did this skill begin to shape and inform other areas of your life? What has this skill taught you? How has it changed your outlook on yourself, others, and the world?

The Personal Insight Questions

Prompt 4: Educational Opportunity or Barrier

4. *Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced. (aka That Time I Learned Something Beyond What Was Being Taught In My Class or That Time I Advocated to Get What I Needed at School.)*

From the UC:

Things to consider: An educational opportunity can be anything that has added value to your educational experience and better prepared you for college. For example, participation in an honors or academic enrichment program, or enrollment in an academy that's geared toward an occupation or a major, or taking advanced courses that interest you — just to name a few.

If you choose to write about educational barriers you've faced, how did you overcome or strived to overcome them? What personal characteristics or skills did you call on to overcome this challenge? How did overcoming this barrier help shape who are you today?

OPPORTUNITY: Why did you take on this experience? What was especially thought-provoking about it? What did you learn about yourself? Did it confirm one way or the other your career goals? How did you showcase your passion or interest in this certain area of study?

BARRIER: How did you identify the problem? Why did you persist to solve it? What did you learn about yourself in the process?

The Personal Insight Questions

Prompt 5: Significant Challenge

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? (aka: That Time The Struggle Was Real And I Worked Through It)

From the UC:

Things to consider: A challenge could be personal, or something you have faced in your community or school. Why was the challenge significant to you? This is a good opportunity to talk about any obstacles you've faced and what you've learned from the experience. Did you have support from someone else or did you handle it alone?

If you're currently working your way through a challenge, what are you doing now, and does that affect different aspects of your life? For example, ask yourself, "How has my life changed at home, at my school, with my friends, or with my family?"

What were your beliefs about yourself and the world before this event happened? What was lost or gained because of this episode? How did you heal or work through this difficult life circumstance? Who are you now because of it and how does it inform your beliefs about others and the world? Because of this, what hopes do you have for yourself and others?

Reserve answering this question ONLY for truly significant life experiences. Notice that the prompt say "the most significant challenge" You shouldn't write about failing a test or getting a low grade in class. The topic here applies more to some truly significant life experiences. This should challenge that actually impeded on other areas of your life. Give this topic the respect it deserves.

The Personal Insight Questions

6. *Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.*
(aka: That Time My Favorite Subject Became My Favorite Subject)

From the UC:

Things to consider: Discuss how your interest in the subject developed and describe any experience you have had inside and outside the classroom — such as volunteer work, summer programs, participation in student organizations and/or activities — and what you have gained from your involvement.

Has your interest in the subject influenced you in choosing a major and/or career? Have you been able to pursue coursework at a higher level in this subject (honors, AP, IB, college or university work)?

What was especially thought-provoking about this class? How did it confirm one way or the other your career goals? How did your part in the class showcase your passion or interest in this certain area of study?

The Personal Insight Questions

Prompt 7: Community

7. *What have you done to make your school or your community a better place? (aka: That Time I Helped My Community Become Better)*

From the UC:

Things to consider: Think of community as a term that can encompass a group, team or a place – like your high school, hometown, or home. You can define community as you see fit, just make sure you talk about your role in that community. Was there a problem that you wanted to fix in your community?

Why were you inspired to act? What did you learn from your effort? How did your actions benefit others, the wider community or both? Did you work alone or with others to initiate change in your community?

What problem did you identify that this community was facing? What was your process to try and come up with a solution? Was the solution successful-why or why not? What does this process showcase about your passion, your intellect, and your heart?

The Personal Insight Questions

Prompt 8: Unique

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? (aka: That Time I Proved To The World I'm One-of-a-kind)*

From the UC:

Things to consider: Don't be afraid to brag a little. Even if you don't think you're unique, you are — remember, there's only one of you in the world. From your point of view, what do you feel makes you belong on one of UC's campuses? When looking at your life, what does a stranger need to understand in order to know you?

What have you not shared with us that will highlight a skill, talent, challenge, or opportunity that you think will help us know you better? **We're not necessarily looking for what makes you unique compared to others**, but what makes you, YOU.

What is an experience or quality that really sets you apart and why? What values does this event or quality showcase about you? Who are you now because of it and how does it inform your beliefs about others and the world? Because of this, what hopes do you have for yourself and others?

Did you answer questions or create questions?

- Review your application
- Read your essay/insight question responses
- Did you create more questions?
- Did you answer questions?
- Does your application demonstrate who you are as a person?
- Will the reader understand your interests and values?
- Did you demonstrate an ability to contribute to the vitality of a campus?

Essay Review

- Family or close friend: What are you missing? How can you get deeper? Is this the right story?
- College admissions professional: Are you answering the prompt? Is this about you? Is this what schools are looking for?
- Language arts teacher: Grammar, spelling, structure (maybe). Senior English teachers are familiar with what schools are looking for as well and can be helpful in that area too!