

### 2022-23 Common App Essay Prompts

[from commonapp.org]

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. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
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 guide below is adapted from the handout I used with my high school seniors.]

## **The College “Easy”**

(Ok, not quite—but these pointers will help.)

Remember what admissions crews look for. Show (i.e., show, don't tell):

- your capacity for growth;
- your ability to make sense of what has happened to you;
- a sense of perspective; and/or
- what you can contribute to the college community.

For ALL drafts you'd like me to read:

- Include question that you're answering and word limit.
- Note what you don't like, have questions about, or other concerns I should pay special attention to.

Notes on language:

- As always, make every word count.
- Diction [word choice] should be thoughtful, but it shouldn't sound like a research paper. Okay to say “I” and to use contractions such as “won't” and “didn't.”
- Can be a little bit conversational, but don't ramble.

## Guidelines for drafting the College Essay [continued]

Common pitfalls to avoid:

- Essay is not essay but big long story about you without any reflection.
- Essay does not answer question.
- Essay tries too hard to be unique or extraordinary. Writing about ordinary things well and deeply distinguishes the writer as extraordinary.
- Essay is unfocused (many times it becomes narrative brag sheet, trying to deal with too much too superficially).
- Essay rings false because conclusion is too easy, pre-packaged, cliché.

Grading: An “A” means your essay is ready to go (thoughtful, strong example of your work, sounds like you, answers question, proofread). Any draft earning a grade less than “A” may be revised until it earns an “A,” and only the “A” will stand as the grade.

## **Ol’ Doc Horn’s College Easy Formula\***

If you’ve got a choice and you’re not sure which prompt to go with, free-write (no distractions, don’t stop writing) two or three options for 20 minutes each and see what’s most interesting to you. Once you’ve decided, each of the following sections would also benefit from free-writing to get ideas flowing before you commit to sentences and structure.

Section One: VIVID ANECDOTE. Start in right away with some part of your focus that shows how well you write descriptively. Doesn’t need to be dramatic, but a little drama wouldn’t hurt. What’s very effective is to bring your reader there with imagery. Help us feel, see, touch, taste it. No fluff, no “universal statements.” Consider historical present tense verbs. If you were directing a film, this section might involve close-ups and slow motion.

Section Two: BACKGROUND, EXPLANATION, CONTEXT. Here things move faster. Give a little background to help the reader make sense of the opening, and perhaps to set up what’s coming in the final section. Answer any questions you expect your reader to have, but don’t go overboard. Make every word count, as always. Stay focused on what you’re trying to *show* about yourself.

Section Three: PERSONAL REFLECTION. This is the money portion. Show that you’ve thought about whatever experience or relationship or aspect of yourself you’ve described. What did it mean to you? What does it mean now?

Especially in this section, avoid clichés. The reader is not going to be interested that you had this significant experience and came away with the idea that “tomorrow is another day.” Instead, keep your ideas specific and true: listen to what you’ve written when you read it aloud. If it sounds like B.S. to you, it’s not going to move anyone else.

\*The magic of this “formula” is that it allows you to pursue a topic with depth and power, showcasing what admissions crews (and other curious readers) are interested in while avoiding the pitfalls I’ve outlined above. You’re not required to use the formula, but especially if you’re stuck about where to start, I recommend you give it a test drive and see how it handles.