

Writing the Common App Personal Essay

What Should I Write About?

“What should I write about?” is one of the most common questions we get from students who are about to start writing their Common App personal essays. They also want to know if admissions officers have favorite topics or ones they are sick of.

Guess what? You can write about anything.

You’re not alone if you thought an essay’s topic was the first thing to consider. That’s what students talk about on websites where just about anyone can share an opinion without much expert moderation. But let’s be clear: It’s hard to answer a question if you don’t understand what it is asking.

Readers already know that you are on the debate team or that you play soccer. They know that you got a B+ in Algebra or scored well on the ACT. What they don’t know is whether you are creative, decisive, determined, self-motivated, or cautious. They don’t know how your experiences have shaped you. Your personal essay offers an opportunity to consider what you want them to know and remember.

Now, look at these instructions for the personal essay on the Common App:

The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. 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. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don’t feel obligated to do so.

These main instructions are the real prompt. The seven options below are doors and windows you can choose from. It doesn’t matter which one you pick; the key question is always: *What do I want colleges to know about me?* This is your opportunity to make your voice heard, to teach readers something new about who you are beyond grades, test scores, and activities.

Common App Prompts in Detail

If you take the time to really understand the prompts, you’ll have a big advantage over applicants who start by trying to find an impressive topic. Remember – that’s not what readers are looking for. Before you start writing a draft, make sure you can balance three important things:

1. The prompt (We've explained them in detail below.)
2. At least one positive characteristic (What kind of person are you?)
3. A relatively recent story that answers the prompt and illustrates your characteristic(s)

Let's Take Apart the Prompts and See What They Really Mean

To really understand the prompts, you need to take some time to read them carefully. Read on for our take on the Common App personal essay prompts.

Prompt 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.

The key word in this prompt is “meaningful.”

To answer this Common App college essay prompt effectively, consider why your background, identity, interest, or talent is significant to you. Colleges are more concerned with who you are than your background, identity, interest, or talent. What does your talent illustrate about you? What have you learned about yourself because of your background?

At its core, the college essay is all about reflection. What do you want readers to know about you after reading your essay? Why does it matter to you? In your response, you will need to focus on why something is meaningful to you, and make sure it answers the prompt.

You could respond to this prompt by sharing insight gained from any background, identity, interest, or talent—a significant conversation, or a moment when you realized something important about yourself—anything that truly and vividly demonstrates who you are and answers the prompt in a thoughtful manner.

Your experience does not have to be particularly impressive; you do not have to write about what you learned while climbing a mountain or how you got over your fear of fires after rescuing three children from a burning building. You could write about how you developed compassion for older people while making meatballs with your grandma, or how you became more confident after navigating a car on an icy highway. Your challenge is to find an idea that illustrates something meaningful. Choose a single moment, or focus on an idea, and then explore it in detail.

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?

Prompt 2 is more specific than #1. In this case, the key sentence is at the end of this prompt: *“How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?”* Your readers are not going to judge you because you had a setback or failed at something. Everyone faces obstacles. The intent of the prompt is to help you reflect on how you deal with unexpected complications and disappointments; that insight can be incredibly revealing.

Answering this prompt requires you to think more broadly about challengers and setbacks, reflect on the experience and demonstrate how you grew or changed as a result. It’s best to focus on the solution, not the problem. Keep the story positive.

What do you want readers to know about you? Have you faced a challenge, setback or failure that shows you are resilient, or demonstrates that you learned to be a leader? Are you the kind of person who can turn every difficult experience into something positive? If this sounds like you, this may be a good prompt to choose.

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

Prompt 3 also asks for reflection. It is one of the most specific questions and requires you to share how you think in a deeper way than some of the other prompts. In this case, the central story should showcase a time when you challenged a belief or idea. Perhaps you challenged a family rule or a school dress code. Did you challenge something you had always believed in, or question something you had long felt uncomfortable with? What happened? What did you learn about yourself?

When has your opinion been unpopular? Why do you stand up for what you believe in? What is so important to you that you feel the need to challenge authority? Why? What inspires you to take action?

During high school, you are constantly asked to look toward the future: Where are you going? What do you want to do with your life? Where will you attend college? What career will you pursue? Your college application essay offers an opportunity to look back, and this prompt is a prime example.

If you are a deep thinker who asks a lot of questions, loves to play the devil’s advocate, challenges authority or questions religious and other dogma, this might be a good prompt for you.

Prompt 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?

On the surface, Prompt 4 seems to be asking about a time you felt gratitude. But it's not quite so simple. This prompt is both reflective and very specific. The key words here are *reflect*, *surprising*, *gratitude*, *affected* and *motivated*.

This prompt invites you to reflect on someone else's action, but the story you tell should not be primarily about the other person's act. It should be about how this experience affected you. What changed for you, or what did you do differently as a result?

And the prompt doesn't ask you to share just any act of kindness. Readers want to know about something someone did for you that made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. Maybe the other person surprised you with their kindness, or maybe you were surprised that you felt so grateful or happy. Or maybe the surprise came through in some other way.

If you can identify a specific story that focuses on you, showcases a characteristic or trait that demonstrates who you are, fits these criteria, and also explains how your gratitude affected or motivated you to do something, this prompt might be for you.

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

Prompt 5 is more specific, but still leaves room for reflection and interpretation. This essay prompt asks you to discuss something you accomplished, an experience that sparked growth and understanding. Remember, you do not have to show that you mastered something challenging to answer this prompt effectively. Rather, you are being asked to demonstrate how you have grown from your accomplishment, personal growth, or insight. What do you know or understand now that you didn't know before?

Colleges want to know about you, not the experience. What did you learn from your accomplishment, event, or realization? Why was it significant? What do you want readers to know about you? Think traits and characteristics, not accomplishments, events, or realizations. The best answer will illustrate the traits and characteristic you want to share with colleges, show insight into your character and answer the prompt

Prompt 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?

The key word in Prompt 6 is "*engaging.*"

This prompt asks about your intellectual curiosity. What motivates you? How and where do you get information? What do you do with it? Why?

The college essay is as much a thinking task as it is a writing task; readers want to know how you think in this and any prompt. What gets you excited? What energizes you? What makes you tick?

Think about who you are. Maybe you care about social justice. Perhaps you're captivated by humor or technology. Is it football? Do you get lost in a good book? A family dinner discussion about world events? Do you scream at the TV during a political debate? How do you learn? The Internet? Your favorite teacher?

Try asking yourself questions like these: Why is this topic, idea, or concept so engaging? How does it make me feel? Who do I talk to about these ideas? Where do I go to research new concepts?

How resourceful are you when your curiosity is piqued to the fullest? The answer to this Common App college essay prompt should also reveal something to admissions about the breadth or depth of your interests.

You can explore the big-picture concept overall or share an example of that concept in action. Whether you collected clothes and toiletries for a local family who lost their home in a fire or attracted 10,000 followers by tweeting a daily joke, the real story will come to life if you can explain why you did it.

Prompt 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 key word in this prompt is "choice."

And while this prompt appears to be different from the others, the purpose is the same. Yes, applicants can submit any essay they want, but as the overall instructions clearly state, even an A+ paper must still illustrate something meaningful about you.

Suppose you want to submit a critical analysis you wrote for Honors English about a character in *Jane Eyre*. Could it work? Maybe. Ask yourself what the essay demonstrates about you. Do you yearn for more than what traditional society allows, like Jane? Does the paper demonstrate how the book propelled you toward political activism? Does it show how the book changed you? After admissions officers read the paper, will they learn something new about you? If not, it won't work as a college essay, no matter how well-written.

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. In any case, consider what you want readers to know about you that can help fill in the unknown details needed to enhance your application package. What do they know? What do you want them to know?

Colleges are interested in the traits that make you who you are, not the experiences or activities that are highlighted elsewhere on your application.

As with all prompts for any type of college entrance essay, the college essay is all about reflection. If you choose this prompt, make sure you tell a focused story about you that shows insight into your character and provides information that colleges wouldn't know about you from the rest of the application.

Back to the Original Question: What Should I Write About?

Here's how to choose a topic that works:

1. Start by making a list of all the things readers will already know from the rest of your application. What are your grades, scores, activities, etc.?
2. Now make a second list. What do you wish they knew about you? No characteristics are better than others. Try filling in this blank: I'm the kind of person who _____. Who what? Are you a good problem-solver? The best listener in your family? Are you flexible and positive?
3. Finally, think of stories you might tell that illustrate the characteristics you want to share.

Once you've done all that, look at the prompts again. Read them carefully. Which ones feel comfortable to you? Some students know right away which prompt they want to choose. Others have a characteristic in mind or a story they want to tell. It doesn't matter where you start. You are trying to balance three elements: characteristics, story and prompt. Get those in balance, and you'll be ready to write.