

2019-20 Common Application Essay Prompts: A Guide

The prompts are open to creative interpretation, allowing room for personal expression while also delineating some helpful guidelines for students to follow. While it is true that the Common Application essay prompts are quite flexible, it is still helpful to know just what admissions will be looking for when they read personal statements in each of these categories. What are these questions really asking? How do the prompts intend to pull students down the path of self-reflection? How can they be used to showcase a student's best assets and personality? Below, are break downs each of the seven prompts, delivering tips and tricks for answering each of these provocative prompts. Keep in mind, students only have to choose and respond to one of the seven choices

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 Common App's Prompt #1 is the Old Faithful of essay questions. It's been around for years and offers all the flexibility an applicant could ask for from a prompt, with just enough direction to get those creative fountains flowing. Focus on the key words "background," "identity," "interest," and "talent" and use them as launch points for your brainstorming. What about your history, personality, hobbies, or accomplishments might be worth highlighting for an admissions officer? It can be something as small as seeing an episode of a television show (are you living life in the Upside Down?) or as large as the struggle of moving to a foreign country (especially if you had to leave behind grandma's cooking). The most important thing to consider for this prompt is that your subject and/or perspective is dynamic and specific to you and who you are and no one else.

Some questions to ask yourself as you brainstorm:

- What about my history or background sets me apart from my peers?
- How do I define myself? How do the people who are closest to me define me?
- What have I achieved that has been integral in molding my character and ambitions?
- What, in my seventeen years on this earth, has helped shape the person I am today?

And some examples to consider:

- Has your family's love of food and your resultant adventurous tastes and culinary curiosity allowed you to connect with cultures from around the world?
- Does your crazy, dyed-blue hair define you?
- Did going to a Picasso exhibit inspire you to start an art collection that has since expanded beyond the borders of your bedroom?
- Have your yearly trips to see your extended family in China revealed something to you about your parents' ability to overcome challenges and the work ethic you have absorbed as a result?
- What are the challenges and rewards of having same-sex parents? Or of being raised by your siblings? Or of being part of a family made up of stepsisters and stepbrothers?

Overall, this prompt has historically served as a fabulous catch-all for subjects that don't fit within the confines of the other prompt options. A recent addition to the Common App's prompt selection now offers even more freedom to applicants (more on that later), but students should still think of Prompt #1 as a topic of immense choice, reeled in by a few helpful guidelines.

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?

We have always believed that essays about overcoming obstacles are most effective when they focus more on solutions than problems. Accordingly, students' responses to Prompt #2 should be directed at a student's response, outlook, and demeanor when presented with one of life's many hurdles, and applicants should aim to showcase qualities like resilience, determination, and humility. The obstacles you choose to explore can vary widely in nature, especially with the recent additions that allow students to explore *challenges* and *setbacks* in addition to failures. They can be as serious as being tormented by bullies, as ingrained as the financial issues that have plagued your family for years, or as seemingly pedestrian as a mistake that costs you a tip while waiting tables. While the possibilities are almost endless, students should be careful not to choose challenges that may seem trite (the inability to achieve an A on an exam and/or secure tickets to that Drake concert) or that illustrate a lapse in good judgment (that time you crashed your car or ate 15 bags of Cheetos in one sitting). Still, if you can isolate an incident of trial in your life and how you learned from it, this can be a rewarding prompt to explore.

Some key questions to consider:

- How do you deal with hardship?
- What qualifies as a challenge or setback in your life and world?
- Are you the kind of person who can rebound—who turns every experience, good or bad, into one from which you can learn something? What experiences might illustrate this quality?
- What have been some of the major challenges you've encountered in your life, and was there a silver lining?

And a few examples to think about:

- Has a lifelong battle with stuttering ultimately increased your overall confidence and allowed you to participate in social activities and public forums without self-judgment?
- Did a parent's fragile health situation challenge you to take on more responsibilities than the average teenager?
- Did a series of setbacks on your road to becoming a child actor introduce you to screenwriting, your professional goal and biggest passion?
- Did your failure to follow directions lead you to a botched home science experiment (root beer explosion!) and an appreciation for a balance of creativity and planned procedure?

Overall, try to keep these stories as positive as possible. Remember, these essays are not just contemplative musings on your toughest times or reflections on the hiccups that populate everyday life (though these things can certainly be touched upon); they are also about overcoming obstacles and refusing to submit to life's greatest challenges.

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

This remains one of the most challenging prompts of the Common App's selection, even though it has become slightly friendlier with the addition of the option to discuss a time you questioned an idea instead of

challenging it. This prompt requires a student to speak passionately about beliefs and ideology, which are often onerous subjects that can be difficult to mold into compact stories. It can be one of the hardest questions to steer in a positive, productive direction without traveling into preachy, overly didactic territory. This is also a more precarious prompt than most in that students need to carefully assess the risks of espousing beliefs that might be polarizing for the readers of their applications.

That said, a response to this prompt can be incisive and deeply personal, as it was for a student who stood up to her parents' old-fashioned outlook on feminism. Applicants who can articulate their thoughts and feelings while showcasing malleability and willingness to thoughtfully consider the ideas of others will likely stand out as valuable additions to any campus. If this prompt jumps out at you because you have a very specific story to tell or opinion to voice, run with it!

Consider these questions as you brainstorm:

- When has your opinion been unpopular?
- Why are you the kind of person who is willing to stand up for what you believe in?
- What is important to you on a fundamental level of morals and values?
- How passionate are you about the things you believe in?

And here are a few examples for you to ponder:

- Are you openly gay in a strict Catholic school environment, and what has that meant for your self-esteem and personal relationships?
- Did you work as an intern on a political campaign caught at the center of a scandal? How did you react?
- Did you challenge the idea of horror as a throwaway genre by executing an extensive research paper on the subject, launching a horror movie club at school, and arranging the most elaborate, best-received haunted house your neighborhood has ever seen?

Your essay does not have to be focused around a fundamentally serious or groundbreaking issue (see the horror genre example above). What matters most when responding to this prompt is that you have strong convictions about the belief or idea you are trying to convey, and that you examine the personal effects of this ethos on your life and world. For this reason, Prompt #3 can be a great vehicle for showcasing your consideration, persuasive skills, and passions to admissions.

PROMPT #4: Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, and 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.

Prompt #4, which asks students to talk about a problem and how they solved or are planning to solve it. This question is similar to Prompt #2 in that it is meant to tease out a student's problem-solving skills and provide a glimpse into an applicant's frame of mind when dealing with challenges. It also provides a few bonus opportunities for creative expression, leaving both the scale and the time frame for setting up a problem/solution wide open.

Students should think about everything from more traditional obstacles they have had to overcome to the small predicaments that have inspired them to think about what they really value. Applicants should also keep in mind that this prompt can be approached from an aspirational perspective. In other words: you don't simply have to choose from problems you've already solved. Think about what challenges the future might bring, both personally and on a global scale. How might you be part of meaningful progress and problem-solving moving forward?

Some other questions to ponder:

- When have you been proactive in attempting to effect change? What inspires you to action?
- What kind of mark would you like to leave on the world?
- How do you think you can positively contribute to a cause that is important to you?
- If you had the power to make a lasting impact in any area at all, what would it be?

And examples to use as food for thought:

- Has your love of nature inspired you to start a charity to help save local endangered species?
- Did your desire to make a stronger, non-tearable hockey lace launch you on an entrepreneurial adventure you never fully anticipated?
- Has your commitment to pursuing medical research inspired you to contact your favorite professors and researchers looking for summer lab positions, and to read every scientific paper you can get your hands on?

It is important that the problem you choose is linked to your life and world in a meaningful way. The whole purpose of this essay-writing exercise is to reveal something valuable about yourself to admissions, so be sure to link the problem you highlight to your passions, actions, or aspirations. And don't forget to detail at least a few steps you would/could take to solve your chosen quandary. While the prompts don't really matter in the initial conception phases of an essay (as you now know), once you've backed into your prompt of choice, following instructions to the fullest and answering all parts of each question are critical.

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

This is the most heavily revised of last year's prompts, which used to ask students to describe a transition from childhood to adulthood. The purview of the inquiry has been expanded to ask about personal growth in general, leaving the lessons and timing of an applicant's transformation more open-ended. Students are also now free to reflect on a "realization" in addition to an "event" or "occurrence." While a realization that changes your understanding of the world will likely be sparked by a concrete marker (i.e., an event or accomplishment), we are happy to take the added flexibility from you, Common App. Thank you very much.

There are a few things to note when unpacking this prompt. Keep in mind that the words "accomplishment" and "event" leave themselves open to interpretation; thus, an essay inspired by this question can tackle anything from a formal event to a very small occurrence. A formal event or accomplishment might include anything from obvious landmarks like birthdays or weddings, to achievements like earning an award or receiving a promotion. More informal examples might include something as simple as meeting a special person in your life, taking a car ride, or eating a particularly meaningful meal. We have often found that 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 or informal, big or small, are fair game.

Your reflection on what you learned and how you grew will be a source of great insight for admissions, and you want to make sure your essay highlights the intangible qualities that don't show up anywhere else on an application.

Some other things to consider:

- How do you react to periods of transition? What inspires a change in your perspective?
- When have you had a "eureka" moment, and how has it impacted the way you lived your life thereafter?

- What were the moments in life that fundamentally changed you as a person?
- When did you learn something that made you feel more adult, more capable, more grown up?

For example:

- Did your expansion of a handmade stationery hobby into a full-fledged business give you the motivation and wherewithal to combat the effects of a debilitating illness?
- Have you learned to love the football team playback sessions that force you to routinely examine your mistakes but also to welcome constructive criticism and point yourself toward self-improvement?
- Did a summer-long role as the U.S. President in a mock government and diplomacy exercise bring out leadership skills you never knew you had?
- What did playing bridge at a senior citizens' home each week show you about the value of enjoyment over competition? How did this change the way you interact and connect with others?

The most important thing to keep in mind when searching for these moments is the element of growth, understanding, and transformation. The event, accomplishment, or realization you discuss should be something that helped you understand the world around you through a different, more mature lens. And, as with Prompt #4, be sure to answer all parts of the question.

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?

College, one could argue, is largely about the pursuit of knowledge, so you can imagine it would be quite appealing for an admissions officer to have a meter for your level of self-motivated learning, along with a better understanding of how and why you choose to pay attention to the things that intrigue you. This is a full-on peek into your brain: how you process information, how you seek out new sources of content and inspiration. How resourceful are you when your curiosity is piqued to the fullest? The answer to this prompt should also reveal something to admissions about the breadth or depth of your interests. For example, if you're interested in studying astrophysics, you might choose to discuss a concept that shows how far your exploration of the sciences truly reaches. How consumed are you by this passion you are choosing to pursue academically?

Some key questions to consider:

- What floats your boat? Do you have an appetite for knowledge about something specific? Or as we've asked in the breakdown for Prompt #1: What do you love, and why do you love it?
- What lengths have you gone to in order to acquire new information about or experiences related to a topic of interest?
- How do you typically seek to enrich your knowledge when something appeals to you? Do you have a favorite corner or the library (or internet)? A mentor who is open to answering your burning questions?
- What about the process of learning, especially about subjects that call out to you, is satisfying?

And a few examples to get those wheels turning:

- Did the idea of open source code inspire you to create a tech startup with a few of your friends? What projects do you work on, and why is the idea of sharing information still so revolutionary?
- Did getting an internship at an accounting firm inspire you to start each day by checking the markets? Do you participate in a mock trading club that allows you to use the expertise you gather from culling through economic news and analysis online and beyond?
- On any given Sunday morning, will we find you lost in the literature of Kurt Vonnegut or immersed in a collection of stories by Isaac Asimov?

- Have you taught yourself to master the compositions of Mozart and Beethoven and break down the songs of Bruno Mars by ear in your spare time?
- Do you have an obsession with pizza so intense it led you to study bread-making and keep a pizza journal that documents the 700+ slices you've consumed thus far? (We know someone who did this—really.) How is pizza-making more scientific and/or artistic than the average person realizes?

Whatever you're into, embrace it. Show your feathers. Let your freak flag fly (within reason, obvs). This prompt is about the pursuit of knowledge and your desire to proactively challenge yourself. Whether you are devouring the classics on your Kindle or "nerding out" over the perfect cheese for calzone-making, your attachment to a subject may inspire admissions to want to learn more about it...and you.

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.

This is a true choose-your-own-adventure style query.

Some questions to consider as you brainstorm, in addition to all of the ones we've posed thus far:

- What do you want admissions to know about you that they wouldn't be able to glean from your transcript, test scores, or teacher recommendations?
- What are the stories that come up over and over again, at the dinner table or in the cafeteria with your friends, that might give admissions some insight into who you are and what is important to you?
- If you had ten minutes alone in a room with an admissions officer, what would you want to talk about or tell him or her about yourself?
- What would you bring to a college campus that no one else would or could?

And a few examples of potential subjects and their related (custom!) prompts:

- Were you born with a congenital eye defect that literally (and metaphorically) affects how you see the world? (*Q: How is your perspective on the world unique?*)
- Do you spend 40 minutes each Friday night tutoring a class of elementary school students in Cambodia? How has that impacted the way you mete out your time and assess your commitments? (*Q: What is the value of 40 minutes?*)
- Did your parents let your older brother choose your name? What was his inspiration? What does your name represent for you? How has it impacted your interactions in the world? (*Q: What's in a name?*)

While being able to write about whatever you wish sounds great in theory, some students find—especially at the beginning of the brainstorming process—that they are debilitated by the “topic of your choice” option because it offers *too* much choice. If that is the case, fear not! Use some of the other prompts as starting points for your brainstorming and freewriting journeys. Begin keeping a diary ([now!](#)) and jot down subjects, events, and memories as they float to the surface. Now that you have read our handy-dandy prompt guide and understand what admissions is looking for from these prompts, you could very well have a notebook filled with ideas that are ripe for expansion by the time you sit down to write.

So don't worry about having too many ideas, or not having enough ideas, especially at the beginning of the topic selection process. Once you figure out what you'd like to say (and maybe even after you draft the crux of the essay itself), see if your concept fits one of the first six prompts. Trying to back into a more specific prompt option may inspire an interesting spin on the story you are trying to tell—one you may not have thought of otherwise. If, after careful consideration, your magic essay topic does not work within the confines of Prompts 1-6, you are in luck. The glorious, all-encompassing Prompt #7 will be here to catch you.

With some brainstorming and hard work, every student can uncover a story worth telling in response to one of these prompts. Remember, admissions wants a glimpse of your personality, your values, your interests and your passions. They want to get an idea of what kind of attitude and energy you will bring to the classroom and campus life. So take a few minutes to probe your memories, collect your stories and strike up that creative core. Every student has a fabulous essay inside of them – these prompts can help you find yours.

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