Prompts and Content

The Common Application has helped simplify things, that’s for sure, by unifying and generalizing the essay writing process. Even still, some schools want you to fill out supplemental essays or short answers – or they might even have their own special essay prompt. Most college essay prompts will fall under one of the following 8 categories. Read through each description for ideas that will help you develop meaningful, engaging content.

1. Why do you want to come to our school?

Schools want to know if you’re seriously considering them, so don’t just tell them they’re a great university with a beautiful campus in a cool town. They already know all that. **Show your interest by doing some research.** Look on their website. Find a major. Look up a professor. See what research she’s doing or what paper she’s just published or what book she’s just written. Mention it and say you’d like to study under her guidance. It’s not a lie. You picked that major and that professor because it all looked interesting. If you’re accepted, you *actually might* study under her guidance!

1. Why should we accept you?

Let’s face it…every applicant has done activities/played a sport, received good grades, won something in Science Fair, blah, blah, blah. Most of this information is already on your transcript/resume. How can colleges choose between all these qualified candidates? You have to make yourself memorable…and **telling a story about yourself** is a great way to make yourself stand out. Talk about a moment or event that shows your character…a time you really helped someone…a time you made a mistake…a time you misjudged someone. Colleges don’t want to accept numbers (which is why sometimes people with great G.P.A.s and standardized test scores don’t get accepted)…they want to accept interesting, intelligent people. Show them that you’re interesting and intelligent by telling a story that you think shows who you really are.

1. What do you see for yourself in the future?

The most obvious response to this prompt is to talk about your intended major and then what you hope to accomplish in that field. And because that’s the most obvious way to answer this question, it’s also the most boring and predictable. Mix it up a little -- **start with a story about a character trait that you have** like perseverance …curiosity... perspective…a sense of humor. Tell a story about yourself that shows you demonstrating that trait. Transition then to say how important that trait is in the field you’re intending to pursue. Select a person who’s already successful in that field and say how he/she has the very same trait. End with the wish that you might be just as (if not more!) successful than that person in the future.

1. Important experiences – success or failure?

Successes are wonderful but stories about them have the potential to sound like you’re bragging. Failures are more interesting…and *overcoming failure and then succeeding* is better still. Tell a story of an epic failure that you had (please…don’t tell us you never failed at anything. Ask your friends or family…they’ll remind you!). Talk about what that failure taught you. End with how learning this lesson helped you to do better later in something else you did. The obvious version of this “overcoming failure” essay is the one in which failure led to success in the same endeavor ( you struck out with the bases loaded and then later hit the game-winning homerun…you didn’t win a medal in the Math competition but then next year you did). The less obvious, more interesting version of the “overcoming failure” essay is the one in which **failure in one endeavor taught you something that led to success in another arena** (striking out with the bases loaded because you were nervous and unprepared taught you to be calm and prepared which lead to you earning a medal in the Math contest). See the difference?

1. Influential person/place

This can be a wonderfully personal tribute to someone you love, respect and care about. You have to realize, though, that they’ve seen every version of this: the “my grandfather/grandmother struggled for me” version, the “my mom/dad taught me everything important” version, the “I know someone who copes with a disease/ addiction/ sickness/ handicap and their determination inspires me” version, the “this famous person inspires me” version. So how do you write *anything* unique with this prompt? First off, we suggest you avoid writing about the famous person. Yes, Martin Luther King, Jr. transformed American society, but you never met him. You only read about him or heard about him from others. Pick a relative, a friend or a colleague and tell a single story about her/him. It shouldn’t be a story that you only heard about (“My grandparents came here from another country”… “My father was the first in his family to go to college”…), but rather **a story that *you’re in.*** Show us you interacting with this influential person and let us see the effect she/he had on you. Make the essay be about *you and the influential person,* not just about her/him.

1. Important belief

Forget what you’ve heard about certain topics being taboo (death, religion, politics)…you can write about anything you want as long as you’re honest and maintain a likeable tone. Now, with that said, you have to be aware of your audience. The person reading your essay doesn’t want to be lectured about how “Trickle Down” economics makes no sense or scolded because they don’t recycle as much as you do. As always, the best way to approach this prompt is with a story. **Tell a story about when you realized the significance of this “important belief”.** Explain why this belief means so much to you and how it shapes multiple areas of your life and the decisions that you make. Don’t try to convince us that your belief is correct…just show us why you believe it. How do you create a likeable tone? Let us know that you have a sense of humor about yourself. Self-deprecating humor works best. In other words, poke a little fun at yourself in the essay.

1. Personal statement

This is a “catch-all” prompt which basically means either “We were too lazy to come up with a prompt” or “Well, if you didn’t like any of the other prompts we gave you, oh for goodness’ sake write SOMETHING about yourself!!!”. We feel like the best approach to the generic “personal statement” prompt is to answer it as if you were responding to one of the aforementioned prompts (a-f). **Stories are always best.**

1. The “weird” prompt

Some schools ask you to respond to absolutely ridiculous prompts: “You have a piece of string, a harmonica, some popcorn and one flip-flop…how will you save the world?” You can either see these prompts as fun and a chance to be creative or as a thinly disguised attempt by a university to get talked about and how “eclectic” it is. Either way (and there’s probably more than a little bit of truth in both perspectives), the admissions’ staff at these schools are probably just trying to avoid getting the same generic essays that they’ve read thousands of times. What they often get, instead, are some of the most over the top essays, unfunny in a desperate attempt to be quirky. The best approach to this type of essay is to have a sense of humor about both the question and yourself, but a *gentle* sense of humor. **Try to base your response on one of the more “conventional” prompts.** Make it a “success/failure” essay or an “important belief” essay or an “influential person” essay, except in this version you’re also saving the world with a piece of string, a harmonica, some popcorn and a single flip-flop. Don’t overthink it. Trying to be too clever will just make you want to bang your head against a table. Have fun with it and then let it go.