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Uncommon Ideas

For the Common Application (2017-2018)



How to use this guide:

The next few pages will include the common app essay prompts with the key words underlined in each prompt. This document rephrases and details what the question is asking you and provides insight to questions or ideas you may consider in order to successfully respond to the prompt.



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.

What is this asking? We have your transcripts, your activity lists, and your standardized test scores, but what makes you, well, you? What about your upbringing or experiences has shaped you into the person you are? Tell us the story we don't see on your application.

- What memories of your childhood come to mind when you think of the word growth? Hurt? Responsibility? Maturity?
- What's your weirdest quirk?
- What memory sticks in your head no matter how much older you get?
- What drives you crazy and how do you deal with it?
- Do you have a hobby that takes you out of your "shell" or makes you feel complete?
- Did you have a nontraditional upbringing or a traditional upbringing that influenced who you became?
- What do you think about while you are engaged in a hobby or activity that brings you joy?
- What do you think about on your way to school? Before you fall asleep?
- Which activities in your life may seem routine for you but unique to someone else?
- Did you experience a hardship of some sort that made you think differently?
- Do you have a cultural or religious identity that shaped you?
- Is there a particular event or pastime that influenced you or changed your perspective?
- What makes you cry? What makes you laugh?
- Is there something about you that makes you very different from other people?
- Do you have a talent that the school might not know about?
- What small aspects of your life do you think are meaningful? Why?

Tip: Looking at past events with a new perspective can help you write this prompt. Think of snapshots from your life.

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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?

What is this asking? Since most successful people have failed a number of times, we want to see that you are perseverant and see obstacles as challenging rather than a permanent setbacks. Recount that time you faced a challenge, setback, or failure, but focus less on “what happened” and more on the lessons you took from it and how you plan to use this lesson in the future.

- Did you try something new? An idea, a class, a sport, an activity that you just couldn't seem to grasp? What did you gain from your struggle?
- What was the biggest challenge you ever faced? How did you overcome it?
- Did you struggle with a job or a responsibly? Did you have to overcome negative emotions?
- Did you ever not meet someone's expectations?
- Did you take a different route from the one others expected for you? Was it more challenging that you had expected?
- Think of a time in which you applied something you learned from a challenge, setback or failure. Explain why you decided to take action.
- Did something good happen to you as a result of something that one might consider to be a failure?
- Have you ever “tried again” or “fell and got back up” either literally or figuratively?
- Has your attitude ever been a failure? What did you do to fix it?
- Watch the TED called “The Power of Belief.” It discusses the idea of fixed mindsets and intelligence and why some of us are afraid of failure. It may trigger an idea.
- What was the funniest thing about a time you failed?

Tip: The focus should not be on the failure; it should be on the learning process and the value of learning from our mistakes.

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Prompt #3

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

What is this asking? We want to see if you're someone who questions the world and recognizes your capacity to change it. We want to see that you have passion and that you take action. We want to see that you reflect on beliefs or ideas instead of simply accepting them.

- Was there a time you said “enough, something needs to change” either internally or externally?
- Did you ever stand up for yourself in a surprising way?
- Did you ever find yourself being asked to do something you strongly disagreed with?
- Was there a time in which you stood up for something you believed in?
- Did you ever question the status quo? Why?
- What morals and values have you challenged? Did you end up keeping them?
- Did your experiences start contradicting a belief you held since childhood? How did you react? Did you challenge the way you thought about yourself?
- Did you hold negative or limiting beliefs about who you were and now your reframed those beliefs to be positive?
- Did someone ever doubt you and you took that as a challenge?
- Did you ever stand up when you thought something was unfair?
- Have you ever had your opinion be the unpopular one? How did you react?
- Have you ever had a completely different idea or viewpoint on a project or assignment? How did you handle it?

Tip: Focus on the concept of a belief or challenge. Reflect on WHY you thought this way . Describe how you felt so the reader can experience the event with you.

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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, 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.

What is this asking? We want to know that you're a problem solver and that you look for ways to improve either yourself, others, or the world around you. This is an opportunity for us to get a sneak peak inside your process of solving problems and also learn more about what you find to be important.

- Have you ever improved a problem in your school or community, either by yourself, in a group, or through an organization?
- What does effective leadership mean and look like to you? Have you ever inspired others to action?
- If you could solve one of the problems in the world, what would it be, how would you go about and why is it significant? For example: famine, education, women's rights, the plights of refugees, animal rights, racism or poverty. (A narrow, more focused issue within one of these topics may be better to write about here.)
- If you were given an opportunity to write a research paper where you picked the topic, what would it be on? What question would you be trying to answer in your research? Let this guide you to think about topics that you find important.
- Did you learn something to help you solve a personal problem? For example, did you learn a language to bridge a language barrier between you and your family members? Did you research how to deal with a situation (for example: family illness; disability; moving; change)?
- What are the smallest changes that could make the biggest difference?

Tip: Spend time planning ahead for the organization of this prompt. Make sure to remain focused on the issue's importance to you and offer reasonable solutions.

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Prompt #5

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

What is this asking? We want you to display a level of maturity through self-awareness.

- Did your parents trust you with a new responsibility at a certain age?
- How have your opinions of others changed for the better over the years?
- Ask your parents about the time they first saw you as a “young adult.” Tell that story.
- Is there a moment you felt especially mature?
- What does personal growth mean to you?
- What are some of the ways that you grow? Do you read, study, take on new challenges, participate in sports or activities?
- How do you measure when you’ve grown?
- Was there an event that you felt forced you to grow up?
- Did you formally transition to adulthood in a religious event? Why was it meaningful?
- Does your family have a unique tradition for “coming of age”? What does growth mean in your family?
- What have you accomplished that made you look at yourself differently?
- What inspires you to continually better yourself?
- When’s the last time you saw people in a completely different light? What sparked this change?

Tip: Be sure to include your thoughts on what personal growth means to you. Avoid only describing the event— this essay needs to be focused on your experiences, the significance behind them, and the impact it made on your life.

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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? [New]

What is this asking? We want to know what you can't stop learning about and why you are so passionate about it. We want to know that you'll focus on something you enjoy and will seek out ways to educate yourself.

- What do you spend most of your time reading online?
- If you could be the world's leading expert on one thing, what would it be?
- Which topic in school or not covered in school have you taught yourself most about?
- What argument do you find yourself defending most?
- Did you ever start your own club, website or company about something you enjoy?
- "If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life." What is this for you?
- Ask someone close to you what the topic they think you're most enthralled with.
- What type of TED talks do you watch or podcasts do you listen to?
- In 15 years, you'll be the author of....?
- Are you a musician, artist, volunteer, athlete, writer?
- What do you do when you need a "break"?
- What did you learn from your greatest teacher or mentor that inspired you to want to learn more?
- What is something you weren't good at initially that you're considered great at now?

Tip: Let your genuine enthusiasm shine through. Mention how you learn more and why it's important for you to learn more.

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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. [New]

What is it asking? We are giving you a gift, and we are ready to let you get creative!

- What is something no one, not even your closest family members and friends, know about you?
- Your life is a movie. What character do you play in life? What genre is it? What is the problem that your character keeps facing? How does he deal with it?
- If you could design a college essay prompt that you'd want every applicant to answer honestly, what would it be?
- Look back at your life from your 80th birthday.
- What is the most interesting thing about your family dynamic?
- Tell about your perfect day.
- If your life had a motto, what would it be?
- How would you describe your personal brand?
- If money would never been any issue, how would you spend your time?
- Ask yourself, "who am I?" over and over until it become uncomfortable.
- Write an honest testimonial about yourself.
- What reoccurring dream or daydream do you have, and how does this accurately represent your life.
- What is your superpower?
- Who have you been pretending to be?
- You have one do-over moment. What is it?
- What advice would you give your 12-year-old self?

Tip: Be yourself. Have fun with this.

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