

College Essay 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. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)

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 lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

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.

Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

I left Cuba with only one memory; people on a busy street, waving around like dark fish. My family escaped when I was two. Throughout my life, I heard many versions of this great escape, and I heard stories about my first pair of shoes, which cost my aunt a couple of chickens; and a magician *deluxe* dad was able to score for my first birthday, and my strange fondness for sour yogurt. My Cuban identity was imaginary; I was an American. Daily life revolved around video games, cable TV, the homework that was due the next day or else, and baseball practice. There was nothing to complain about, but I constantly felt I was being dragged by required assignments.

Three years ago I returned to Cuba, and it changed the pace of my American life.

Before the trip, mom gave me a list of *don'ts* that didn't fit with my quaint made-up memories: *don't talk about government, don't ask for seconds, don't say a word in English, don't say anything negative*. I repeated this last one over and over when we rode to tia's house. It was shocking to see every building was falling apart. Everything was dirty, broken, sad. People too.

The first person to come out of the house and greet us was my favorite cousin in theory. I didn't really know him, but he sounded like a cool dude. He was older by a few years and constantly called me Hectico, Hectico... even though I was twice his size. At first we didn't have too much to say and I kept on slipping English words in, but after a few days he started sharing his "secrets". He took me thru an old train track that led to a river; and showed me the girl with long hair he liked since he was six; and at night, he pulled Animal Farm from under the mattress. I thought hmm, I read this in 8th grade, what's with the secrecy? He had borrowed it from a clandestine library and the book was so forbidden he had to hide it from grandma. I was shocked. He explained that anything signaling dissent (a book, an outfit, a phrase) could get you in jail for "dangerousness". I felt really sorry for him, and I think he regretted showing me the book, so I didn't ask any more questions.

A couple of days later he was eating the breadcrumbs that fell on his shirt, and said out of the blue, "I didn't pick my major, I'm going into industrial engineering but the only thing I like is history": I told him we weren't allocated into careers in my country and he asked me what I was passionate about. I didn't really know what to say. Julius Cesar (his father was into history too) knew exactly what he liked and he couldn't study it. He knew exactly what he felt and he couldn't talk about it. I wondered how he was going to have a happy life without the freedom to make basic life decisions. He *has* to have low self-esteem. He's like living a lie.

I couldn't do anything for him and it made me furious. I decided to disobey one of mom's rules and ask other people about government. I got responses like "well nobody lives a hundred years" or "yeah, you know, things are bad, but *El Cubano* can always improvise." I also heard lots of jokes. All my family and neighbors were dissenters, but they were all indifferent in some way. Some had resigned themselves to

Hector Canciano

just wait and others complained anonymously by laughing at their own unhappiness. "Instead of spanking newborns, the doctors tell them 'you were born in Cuba' [loud crying sound]."

What's so funny about being intellectually oppressed? Why doesn't anyone care about Julius? As difficult as it was to see this, I realized a harder truth. I was a hypocrite. The Cuban government censored information and opportunities these people were hungry for; and my country had given me everything and I was too busy playing Halo. Somebody must have flipped a switch in my head at that moment. I got angry with myself; I wanted to know what to major in, I wanted to make a difference. I left Cuba with one answer; that I didn't value my freedom, and I cried like the joke-baby when I got back to my room.

I didn't speak much for a week and my mom got really worried. I don't know why, I was just thinking. The trip made me realize that very few things happen naturally. If people don't make demands of their government they crumble like the buildings in Havana. If I do the minimum required, I'm never going to achieve anything great, and I *have* to achieve something great, if only because I can.

For the remainder of the summer I put myself on a diet and exercise routine (I figured that was the easiest way to discipline my mind). I started reading the news and googleing a lot of the issues to understand them well. I joined debate, ran for student council, volunteered 20 hours a week, joined the Democratic Student Alliance, enrolled in AP classes, interned for Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen and for President-Elect Obama.

The pace of my American life has changed, no doubt. Now I live on an academic calendar to be able to manage all my to-do's; and the best feeling in the world is that the to-do's are not required, they are all things I find important and gratifying. My great escape from Cuba is just a story to me, but my great return saved me from living a mediocre life.

I wrote to Julius this year to tell him I would be majoring in Politics.

Worksheet: Brainstorming for College Application Essays

(1) Personal Experiences Question

Identify:

1. a significant experience:
2. an achievement:
3. a risk you have taken:
4. an ethical dilemma you have faced:

Its impact on you:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

(2) Issues Question

Identify:

1. a personal issue:
2. a local issue:
3. a national issue:
4. an international issue:

Its impact on you:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

(3) Influential Person

Identify 3 people who have influenced you:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

How did this person influence you?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

(4) Creative/Historical Influence

Identify:

1. a fictional character:

2. a historical figure:

3. a creative work:

How it influenced you:

1.

2.

3.

(5) Personal Contribution/Diversity

Identify a specific experience:

1. Academic interests:

2. Personal perspectives:

3. Life experiences:

How it shows the importance of diversity:

1.

2.

3.

An encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you:

College Entrance and Scholarship Application Essay Topic Selection

In this exercise, you will find a list of Do's and Don'ts for selecting a topic, along with comments from long-time admissions officers. For each of your five potential topics, fill in this checklist. If you find yourself repeatedly answering "no" to these questions for any given topic, you should drop it and move on to another.

1. Have I selected a topic that describes something of personal importance to my life?

Admissions Officer Says: *"Personalize your essays as much as possible. Generic essays are not only boring to read, they're a waste of time because they don't tell you anything to help you get to know the applicant any better."*

2. Am I avoiding a gimmicky topic? You should be very, very careful of trying to write your essay in iambic pentameter or with lots of jokes. Almost always, this is done poorly and is not appreciated by the admissions committee. Nothing is worse than not laughing at something that was written to be funny.

Admissions Officer Says: *"Gimmicks are a big mistake, and a sarcastic or flippant tone will often offend."*

3. Does my topic stay away from information listed elsewhere on my application? Don't mention GPAs or standardized test scores in your essay. That's what the resume and other parts of the application are for.

Admissions Officer Says: *"Listings of anything are dull, no matter how impressive." "Essays should be about more than just a running tally of accomplishments."*

4. Will I be able to offer vivid supporting paragraphs to my essay topic? Do not choose a topic if you cannot provide concrete examples for the body of the essay.

Admissions Officer Says: *"Details provide the color, the spice, and the life of the essays." "As the saying goes, if you're going to talk the talk, you better walk the walk."*

5. Can I fully answer the question asked of me? Can you address and elaborate on all points within the specified word limit, or will you end up writing a poor summary of something that might be interesting as a report or research paper? If you plan on writing something technical for an application, make sure you can back up your interest in a topic and not merely throw around big scientific words. Unless you convince the reader that you actually have the life experiences to back up your interest in neurobiology, the reader will assume that you are trying to impress him or her with shallow tactics. Also, be sure that you can write to admissions officers and that you are not writing over their heads.

Admissions Officer Says: "Actually answer the question they ask. Many people just list off their accomplishments and never relate it to the theme of the question."

6. Will my topic keep the reader's interest from the first word? The entire essay must be interesting, considering admissions officers will probably spend only a few minutes reading each essay.

Admissions Officer Says: "If the first paragraph doesn't fix my attention, like anyone I'm prone to skimming."

7. Is my topic unique? Some students are so concerned about making the correct impression that they edit out anything that would help their essay stand out. They submit a "safe" essay that is, in reality, sterile, monotonous, and deadly boring. Most topics are in fact overdone, and this is not necessarily a bad thing, but a unique and convincing answer to a classic topic can pay off big. Furthermore, when applying to a competitive program that might be out of your reach, taking a risk in the essay may help your chances by standing out.

Admissions Officer Says: "Applicants should not be afraid to go out on a limb and be themselves-even when that means incorporating humor or being a little bit controversial."

8. Am I being myself? Admissions officers want to learn about you and your writing ability. You must develop your own voice and tell YOUR story, not the story you think the reader wants to hear. Write about something meaningful and describe what you did and felt, and your essay will be unique. Many people travel to foreign countries or win competitions, but your feelings during these events are unique to you. Unless a philosophy or societal problem has interested you intensely for years, stay away from grand themes that you have little personal experience with.

Admissions Officer Says: "It is through the essay that the admissions officers reading the application will feel that they have truly gotten to know you."

9. Does my topic avoid hot-button issues that may offend the reader? If you write on how everyone should worship your God, how wrong or right abortion is, or how you think the Republican Party is evil, you will not get into the college of your choice. The only thing worse than not writing a memorable essay is writing an essay that will be remembered negatively. Stay away from specific religions, political doctrines, or controversial opinions. You can still write an essay about Nietzsche's influence on your life, but express understanding that not all intelligent people will agree with Nietzsche's claims. Emphasize instead Nietzsche's influence on YOUR life, and not why you think he was wrong or right in his beliefs.

Admissions Officer Says: "It is dangerous for a non-professional (especially a high school student) to attempt writing as though the essay will be presented at a professional conference. You may be writing to someone who knows much more than you and will be irritated by your hackneyed proclamations."

10. Is my essay honest? Unless you are a truly excellent writer, your best, most passionate

writing will be about events that actually occurred. While you might be tempted to invent hardship, it is completely unnecessary. Write an essay about your life that demonstrates your personality.

Admissions Officer Says: *"After 15 years of reading hundreds of essays a year, you develop an amazing ability to see straight through the bull."*

11. Will an admissions officer remember my topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays? What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you? What will your lasting impression be?

12. If you are writing about something unfortunate that has happened to you, ask: Am I able to highlight my impressive qualities under difficult circumstances without sounding pathetic? Unless you only use the experience as a lens with which to magnify your own personal characteristics, you will not write a good essay. Graduate and professional school applicants should generally steer clear of this topic altogether unless the experience can arguably help one become a better businessman, doctor, lawyer, or scholar.

13. Does my essay fit in well with the rest of my application? Does it explain the unexplained and steer clear of what is already obvious? For example, if you have a 4.0 GPA and a 1500 SAT, no one doubts your ability to do the academic work; addressing this topic would be ridiculous. However, if you have an 850 SAT and a 3.9 GPA or a 1450 SAT and a 2.5 GPA, you would be wise to incorporate into your essay an explanation for the apparent contradiction. For example, perhaps you were hospitalized or family concerns prevented your dedication to academics; you would want to mention this in your essay. However, do not make your essay one giant excuse. Simply give a quick, convincing explanation within the framework of your larger essay.

14. Does my topic avoid mentioning my weaknesses? You want to make a positive first impression, and telling an admissions officer anything about drinking, drugs, or partying undermines your goal. EssayEdge editors have read more essays on ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) than we would hope. Why admit to weakness when you can instead showcase your strengths?

15. If you think you can add diversity to the school to which you are applying, ask: Does my essay specifically demonstrate how my uniqueness will contribute to the realm of campus opinion, the academic environment, or the social life? Every college, professional school, or graduate school wants to increase diversity. For this reason, so many applicants are tempted to declare what makes them different. However, simply saying that you are a black, lesbian female will not impress admissions officers in the least. While an essay incorporating this information would probably be your best topic idea, you must subtly handle the issue by addressing your own personal qualities and how you overcame stigma or dealt with social ostracism. If you are a rich student from Beverly Hills whose father is an engineer and whose mother is a lawyer, but you happen to be a minority, an essay about how you dealt with adversity would be unwise.

Once you have used this checklist for each of the five topics you came up with in Lesson One, narrow the list down to the three topics that most easily pass all of the suggestions above.

- At this point, you might have a topic so inspiring that the essay writes itself. However, even seemingly boring topics can be made into exceptional admissions essays with an innovative approach. In writing the essay you must bear in mind your two goals: to persuade the admissions officer that you are extremely worthy of admission and to make the admissions officer aware that you are more than a GPA and a standardized score, that you are a real-life, intriguing personality.

[illegible]