

CA4: The New Common Application: New Essay Prompts

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The Common App is a not-for-profit organization serving students and almost 500 colleges and universities in the college application process. By allowing you to fill in the application once and submit it to several schools, it streamlines the application process for colleges and universities that are members of the Common Application. Once the student registers and creates a username and password, the search for and addition of colleges/universities to apply to becomes relatively easy. A word of caution: each school will require individual information pertinent to them, and some will ask for additional essays. Students are encouraged to study their individual choices and to keep their total list at no more than eight places where they believe they will thrive.

The next generation of the Common Application is set to launch August 1, 2013 and includes new essay prompts that will strictly enforce a 650 word limit; the application will not accept a response shorter than 250 words.

Much anxiety accompanies a college essay as it demonstrates the ability to organize thoughts and to write well and clearly. It is also the primary place to “distinguish yourself in your own voice” (C4 essay instructions). The new essay prompts are listed below with a short explanation of what is being asked. It is extremely important that one reads the question well and understands the prompt. Remember this is where you will express to the college you are applying to things about yourself that transcend numbers and activities. Before starting, reflect on what you would like colleges to know that is individual to you. Don’t hesitate to brainstorm with friends or family.

• Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

The key phrase in the prompt is “central to their identity.” You have listed activities, courses, and work experiences in your application, but this is where you can talk about how something in particular has affected you. It can be something quite inconsequential such as an errand done, a chance encounter, but the important element is to talk about you and not just the experience. The event is a springboard about what you learned and what you gained. Your writing should be specific and your choice of verbs strong. Most important is that it should be your writing and your voice. You can read it to parents or friends, but finally it is to be your writing. Colleges can tell when a written piece is over polished or not the work of a 17 or 18 year old. Every piece of writing in your application should have at least 3 drafts before submission.

• Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?

Again the most important phrase is “how did it affect you and what lessons did you learn?” Every one experiences failure but it is what we have learnt that is important. Did you run for an

office and lose? Did you mess up in a game, forget your lines in a play, or have you experienced a more dramatic failure. The important thing is to show what you learnt from the experience that will have the reader gain some insight unique to you that is not readily available in the application.

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

Despite your relatively young age, this prompt encourages you to reflect on something you believe in or disbelieve in. Perhaps you challenged an academic, societal or political view. The important thing is to not dwell so much on the belief itself, but to tell a specific story that tells us more about you and why you questioned the belief and whether you would still challenge the idea. Remember you do not know who will be reading your essay, so be particularly sensitive in addressing this topic.

• Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?

After a concise description of the place, move to what you experience and most importantly why it is meaningful to you. Again it is not the place or environment that should be dwelled upon. What is it about this place that makes it special for you? What do you do there that makes you perfectly content? It does not have to be a beach in Mexico. It could be your kitchen, the art studio, the baseball pitch, or your dining room.

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

The key element here is “marked your transition.” Once again you must reflect upon your past. This event need not be as monumental as a family crisis. It could be any relatively mundane event such as spending your first pay check, describing your first time away from home, or your first adult accomplishment. The important thing is that it really needs to explain why it was a transition from childhood to adulthood for you. Specific events, particular to you are more insightful to the reader than a larger traumatic event shared by a group.

Remember the essay is not a substitute for a rigorous curriculum, strong grades and a strong set of standardized scores. However, all being equal, it can make a difference. To sum up: understand the prompt, brainstorm, reflect upon yourself, write in your own voice, and review with three drafts. A good essay takes time.