

## In this lesson, you will:

- Step 1: Organize your essay plans & prompts
- Step 2: Learn about the Common App essay
- Step 3: Read samples & write rough drafts of your essay(s)
- Step 4: Revise and edit your essays into final drafts

# College Admissions Essays 101



# Step 1: Organize your writing schedule

✎ Though not required, it is highly recommended that you start by organizing ALL of the following information into a table for ANY colleges to which you plan to apply:

- Name of institution
- Common App (yes/no)
  - Check [the list here!](#)
- Additional essay prompt? (If so, include it)
- Word counts
- Due date for application
- Additional information for scholarships (if they have additional essays, especially THOSE prompts and deadlines)



# One sample schedule (for 2017-2018)

Name	Common App?	Other Essay prompt(s)?	Word count	Due Date*
Georgetown U.	No	Yes (*requires login to see)	TBD	1/10/18
Harvard College	Yes		650	1/1/18
MIT	No	Short answer questions	TBD	1/1/18
Ohio State University	Yes	*If trying for Honors program	650	2/1/18
Stanford U.	Yes		650	1/3/18

\*Dates listed are for REGULAR admission; source is the College Board.

# Let's talk about this essay you must write...

## Most essays at school...

- ✎ Exact genre varies (literary analysis, report, etc.)
- ✎ Have a clear rubric (or at least general, common guidelines to follow)
- ✎ Have an audience you know (your teacher) who also knows you.
- ✎ The teacher reads and agonizes over your grade for varying lengths of time
- ✎ Are not competitive (there aren't a set # of A grades...)

## College admissions essays...

- ✎ Are personal essays (mix of informative, persuasive, narrative)
- ✎ Don't have rubrics, and only some vague directions/ guidelines.
- ✎ Have an unfamiliar audience (either one person or several) who doesn't know you. They have no context other than what's on the paper.
- ✎ Are read in seconds or minutes, and the reader makes a snap decision.
- ✎ Are "competing" with other essays.



# ...which means that...

## College admissions essays...

- ☞ Don't have rubrics, and only some vague directions/guidelines.
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- ☞ Are read in seconds or minutes, and the reader makes a snap decision.
- ☞ Is competitive.

## ... require you to...

- ☞ You have to follow the rules you do have, and make educated guesses.
- ☞ You can't assume anything or leave anything important unsaid. It's the academic equivalent of "leaving it all on the field."
- ☞ You have to make a great first impression, AND maintain it, AND have a great ending.
- ☞ You have to write better\* than some percentage of other people, \*including content and/or style.

# So, let's set some ground rules.

## ☞ These essays ASSUME that you will:

- Follow the prompt
- Fully edit/proofread your work – NO grammar or spelling mistakes!
- Stay within the word count that is given
- Write in somewhat-traditional paragraph and essay structure
- Follow appropriate formatting when necessary

## ☞ However, you must also remember that:

- This is basically a competition. There are “winners” and “losers.” Your goal at all times should be to BOTH “get in” and “get money” (scholarships) – be ambitious and do not settle for mediocre writing!
- There are a LOT of other students responding to the SAME prompts, and so part of your job is to be ABOVE AVERAGE and MEMORABLE. You must stand out from your peers to succeed!

# Let's focus on that last part.

∞ “...part of your job is to be **ABOVE AVERAGE** and **MEMORABLE.**”

∞ This means, in addition to successfully writing a “basic” or “standard” essay, you should also strive to...

- Be unique.
- Be memorable.
- Be a strong writer.



# Don't believe me? Think about it.

∞ In the perfect world, what do colleges WANT?  
Academically proficient students who...

- Want to over-achieve
- Will join clubs or organizations
- Might do academic research
- Are ready for the academic demands
- Are goal-oriented, have a plan, and are ready to take action
- Will “hit the ground running” from the moment they enter campus
- Are “worth” the investment of an admission slot and/or scholarship \$
- Have evidence to prove that they are exemplary students and people.

∞ ...In other words, they want someone who will make THEM look good, either in the short-term or long-term.

While you should NEVER, EVER lie or exaggerate, you DO need to present yourself as a worthwhile investment.





# Step 2: Prompt Analysis

Let's look at the Common App first.



We will examine each of the seven prompts.

# Common App Directions

- ✎ Do NOT make your Common App essays too specific to any one college, since all of the ones you apply to will see the same one.
- ✎ The word limit is 650 words (Pay attention to formatting when you copy/paste it into the App)
- ✎ You can change your essay up to three times when you submit it, BUT you should really turn in the best possible essay on the first try!



# Prompt Analysis: #1

Common App  
(Same prompt as past years)

- ∞ 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.
- **Good for you if:** you have a major accomplishment, a unique cultural background, or an interesting personal situation that:
    - Hasn't been addressed anywhere else in the application, and/or
    - Would help EXPLAIN something about your app.
  - **The TRAP is:**
    - that you'll spend too long writing about that situation, instead of circling back to how great you are, OR
    - that your chosen story won't show personal growth or positive attributes.
  - **Here's the Deal:** This is (arguably) the most open-ended prompt of all five. Sometimes this prompt is used to make excuses, and sometimes it is used to tell awesome stories of overcoming adversity or a unique point of view/experience! Use this to highlight why you're unique, talented, or another positive characteristic.

# Prompt Analysis: #2

Common App  
(Revised 2017-18)

∞ 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?\*

- **Good for you if:** you have overcome adversity and triumphed, whether it was small and personal or large and public.
  - This is sometimes used to explain academic struggles.
- **The TRAP is:** Focusing disproportionately on the failure, instead of sufficiently talking about:
  - How you grew as a result of the failure
  - The process you used to overcome it
  - How you are better/stronger now (and thus a better future college student)
- **Here's the Deal:** This is a problem/solution essay in disguise.
  - Keep the balance appropriate (see above)
  - Have a POINT (thesis or theme)
  - Be careful of clichés and exaggerations. You want to elicit real, honest emotion, and not over-dramatize a failure that wasn't actually significant.

☞ Reflect on a time when you *questioned* or challenged a belief or idea. **What prompted your *thinking*? What was the *outcome*?**\*

- **Good for you if:** you've wrestled with ethics, been a whistleblower, had a shift in beliefs, actively questioned tradition, etc.
- **The TRAP is:**
  - Talking too much about just the situation (and not making a point about who you are, what you believe in, what you're like, etc.)
- **Here's the Deal:** If you pick this one, make sure it's a meaningful story in which you learned something.

# Prompt Analysis: #4

Common App  
(Same prompt as past years)

∞ 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.

- **Good for you if:** You've had an opportunity to be innovative, do research, or pursue a goal, OR if you have a passion for a specific issue.
- **The TRAP is:** Talking about the problem and solution exclusively (and not letting it reflect you, your passions, your talents, your goals, or your actions).
- **Here's the Deal:**
  - Like prompt #2, this is a problem/solution essay in disguise.
  - This prompt has all kinds of potential! Admissions directors want to see critical thinking, your values, and your problem-solving skills ALL wrapped into one.

# Prompt Analysis: #5

Common App  
(Revised 2017-18)

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

- **Good for you if:** you have a unique story to tell about a specific turning point in time, including how it changed you.
- **The TRAP is:** To talk exclusively about that event, in the past tense, instead of using it to reflect who you are now.
- **Here's the Deal:** Not everyone will have a story that fits this prompt. If you don't, it's okay! Pick one of the other ones.

# Prompt Analysis: #6

Common App  
(New in 2017-2018)

☞ 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?

- **Good for you if:** you have a passion, hobby, or skill that you can discuss with great enthusiasm!
- **The TRAP is:** To talk exclusively about your passion and how great, interesting, or problematic it is; don't forget to let it reveal YOUR personality, skills, or problem-solving.
- **Here's the Deal:** Colleges are secretly hoping to uncover what kind of student you'll be – a hard worker? A researcher? Someone who will take on a challenge? Impress them with your passion AND your action steps!



# Prompt Analysis: #7

Common App  
(New in 2017-2018)

☞ 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.

- **Good for you if:** you strongly feel that you have a high-quality essay that doesn't quite "fit" the other prompts; also great if you have a unique story, idea, or topic.
- **The TRAP is:** the "one you've already written" part. Submitting an essay that ISN'T very good, just because you don't want to do the other prompts. (For example, don't reuse a school essay if it does nothing to make you seem appealing to a college!)
- **Here's the Deal:** Colleges are trying to be fair to all students with this prompt, but it still needs to be **high-quality** writing that helps (instead of hurts) you.

# Talk out loud for 1 minute.



What observations do you have about those seven prompts?

Which one(s) are you leaning toward?

# Let's be real. A few more tips...

- ✎ Prompts #3 and #5 (and to a lesser extent, #2) are not for everyone. If those prompts don't match your life experiences, don't make up or exaggerate something to “make” it fit.
- ✎ Beware of cliché essay topics. Remember – your goal is to stand out, either in content/topic or at least the way you handle it.
  - **For Example:** Think carefully about writing an essay about “how volleyball changed your life.” **There will be a LOT of sports essays**, and you'll need to make sure you can put an interesting twist on it (or risk sounding the same as everyone else!)
- ✎ You might change your mind about which prompt(s) to complete, and you might have to redo a draft from scratch. Both of those are okay! 😊

# Let's Review (before moving on)

- ✎ All of these prompts have advantages AND traps.
- ✎ Tell a story that reflects who you are in a positive light.
  - You do not have an advantage from picking one over another, BUT you could put yourself at a DISadvantage if you don't pick a prompt/story that really works well for you.
- ✎ Never write anything you can't prove. (Don't lie or exaggerate.)
  - Present the best (but still honest) version of yourself.
- ✎ Turn the prompt's focus back on yourself, or use it to highlight something great about you.
  - Strive to be unique/memorable, seemingly worthy of investment, and the best, most honest version of yourself!

# Step 3: Get Ready to Write!



# Your Homework

## This FALL, you should...

- If you haven't already, make that chart of prompts & due dates.
- Write rough drafts.
- Get at LEAST two adults (not parents unless they're English teachers) to read your work, critiquing both content and style.
- Complete all the OTHER pieces of the application; add the essay when ready.
- Consider getting all this done WAY BEFORE the actual deadline. Don't procrastinate and get stressed!

## For CLASS, here's the plan:

- Pick ONE prompt, either from the Common App or a specific college, and write an essay draft for that prompt.
  - You MUST limit yourself to their word count!
- Once I give you feedback, consider revising before sending it to a college!



# How you will be graded

Follow along on your RUBRIC!



- ✎ Organization/Structure
- ✎ Beginning
- ✎ Answering the Prompt;  
Clear ideas/theme(s)/  
thesis
- ✎ Ending
- ✎ Grammar
- ✎ Subjective Overall  
Impression\*
  - (\*see next slide)



## \*Rubric Row: “Subjective Impression”

- ∞ For this category, I will pretend, as much as I can, to be a biased college admissions person (who DOES NOT KNOW YOU, and ONLY has the essay to work with).
- ∞ I will grade you based on the somewhat subjective criteria we discussed earlier, such as:
  - Memorable/unique, did you present yourself well, do you seem worthy of “investment,” etc.



# Any Questions?



If not, then we will continue... 😊

# Quiz!

1. How are college admissions essays different from the other ones you have written before?
2. What are admissions officers/readers looking for?
3. What characteristics should your essay have, regardless of the prompt?
4. What advice and/or traps should you consider while drafting (or revising) a college admissions essay?
5. What do you think is the most important advice that you're taking away from this lesson?

# Example essays

- Go to the website below and choose TWO essays which you will read and analyze. Be ready to report your findings to the class. Be sure to be able to answer the question, “How did this essay get on the ‘Best Of’ List?”
- <https://www.apstudynotes.org/common-app/>

