

## Lesson 04: Writing Your College Entrance Essays

For this assignment, you are required to respond to **4** essay prompts from the available UC prompts and **2** prompts from the Common App.

### Advice:

- **Don't bore me or the College Entrance Readers**
- **Proofread your own work, if I have to make comments like "capitalize" or "spelling wrong" then you are going to annoy me, therefore, annoy the College Entrance Reader**
- **Brainstorm before you write, talk to people, what should be your angle**

Students choose 4 out of the 8 total UC essay prompts and respond with **350-word answers**. The prompts were updated as recently as last year, so we can anticipate no change for the 2024-25 application season.

1. Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes or contributed to group efforts over time.
2. Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.
3. What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?
4. Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.
5. Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?
6. Describe your favorite academic subject and explain how it has influenced you.
7. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?
8. What is the one thing that you think sets you apart from other candidates applying to the University of California?

## **2025 Common Application Essay Prompts (650 words)**

### **Guide to answering and brainstorming for the Common App**

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. [No change]
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? [Revised]
3. Reflect on a time when you *questioned* or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your *thinking*? What *was the outcome*? [Revised]
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. [No change]
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or *realization* that *sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others*. [Revised]
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]
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]

## Sample College Entrance Essays

### **The Palate of My Mind—Meghna**

A question that every high school senior is familiar with is: “What kind of college is the right fit for you?” My criterion doesn’t appear in the deluge of admissions pamphlets; that’s because I want my school to resemble my favorite dish: the hummus-tabouli wrap.

...and Johns Hopkins University is the creamiest, tangiest, most flavorful hummus-tabouli wrap in existence.

The secret to any savory wrap lies in how its flavor is contained. Regardless of what outside influences are imposed upon it, the pita bread expertly holds all of its ingredients without allowing them to spill. Hopkins opposes outside pressures, unapologetically supporting individuals who are unafraid to break tradition. The OUTlist, an online database for Hopkins affiliates who openly identify themselves as members of the LGBT community, revolutionized the visibility of LGBT individuals in higher education and created a support network at the university. For students who are struggling with their identity (due to the fear of coming out to their families or friends), I want to help them express themselves and understand that they are not alone. I want to serve as an advocate as well as a source of comfort, like a homemade pita that is warm and soft, yet tenacious.

Next on our wrap is the core layer of hummus, lathered on the pita and heavy with expectation. Being the most renowned staple of the Mediterranean diet comes with its pressures, but hummus handles it well, always stepping up to the plate, ready for any intimidating food critic. Similarly, Hopkins’s academic diversity lives up to its reputation and more. The Classics Department offers 83 different undergraduate courses, with varied paths that students can take in the pursuit of cultural and literary knowledge. I hope to study the interrelationship of modern literature and culture and its classical roots in Latin by examining international texts in courses such as Latin Literature Beyond Hermeneutics taught by Professor Butler. I intend to further facilitate international communication—a modern necessity—by researching how English is adapted by different cultures. I can imagine narrowing my research from World Englishes to the

fundamentals of the English language that bring about its malleability under Professors Celenza or Roller of the Classics Department.

After the hummus follows the influx of diced tomatoes, onions, and parsley, all varied in taste, combining to form the tabouli sauce. Tabouli is accepting of its ingredients, which when combined, bring to it a taste that is unparalleled by any other ingredient of wrap. I hope to spend my next four years in the Hopkins community learning alongside students from backgrounds starkly different from my own, who, like each component of tabouli sauce, bring their varied perspectives to discussions, an invaluable trait when studying how English has been adapted by different cultures. In this world of flavorful foods and people, the delectable allure of Johns Hopkins University entices the palate of my mind. And I hope to eat my fill.

“Meghna effectively connected her academic and extracurricular interests with opportunities available at Hopkins. It was clear she understands what the Hopkins experience could look like for her. The most exciting thing about this essay was the way she elaborated on her academic interests while also telling us something about her that we couldn’t learn through any other part of her application—her favorite food.”

—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

### **In Pursuit of the Sublime—Kaylee**

Goal: 40,000.

I wrote because it made me somebody else—somebody who mattered. The power of writing, I believed, existed solely in one’s ability to pursue the sublime. So I wrote to create different, better manifestations of my life. I grew up dreaming and writing (and thinking they were the same) about being a Hermione Granger with Harry as my sidekick battling twenty Voldemorts (twenty!); my stories were dynamic. I was cool.

Status: 5,000.

My mom once joked that I should audition for the role of Cho Chang. I threw a chopstick at her. Cho Chang was weak, so terribly weak that Harry

dumped her.

I knew why she said it though—I rarely existed in books and when I did, I was the Cho Chang, the inconsequential, insignificant Asian girl who could never assert herself.

In a fit of spite, I killed my Hermione, realizing I could never be her.

Status: 1,000.

Somebody once told me to read *The Joy Luck Club* but I never bothered. A book about a bunch of Cho Changs couldn't possibly be sublime.

Instead, I buried myself in the books hidden under my bed, away from Mom, about girls in high school who didn't do anything besides fall in love. So, to improve my own story, I decided to fall in love with the first boy to call me pretty.

I was satisfied.

Status: 8,000.

Living life vicariously was comfortable and easy.

Perhaps that's why, at fifteen, I paid no mind to my grandpa's deteriorating health or my dad's anxiety. Because these were not the kinds of pain I had ever read about, I didn't find them good enough to write about.

So, I went looking for better inspiration—for more mockeries of love, ways to validate my insecurities, and priorities that shouldn't have been labeled as such.

It was all so cool that I couldn't stop writing about it.

Status: 11,000.

During this magnificent, glorious streak of writing, dreaming, and pretending, I learned that 40,000 words make a novel.

I had to do it. Once I get published, everybody would get a taste of my sublimity. Mom and Dad would be so impressed. I'd probably even become famous! Hence, I became fervently obsessed with word count and cared for little else.

Status: 15,000.

But then I turned seventeen and finally began to process what I had experienced years earlier. I had been witness to my grandpa, reduced to flesh and bones (but hardly any flesh), barely clinging to life in a maggot-infested hospital in Dengzhou—something I had forced myself to forget.

Suddenly, I couldn't keep pretending that crafting a fictitious version of my life on paper could replace what is real.

I erased everything.

Status: 0.

I started over.

I wrote about my real thoughts, my family, the times I was happy, and the times I was not. I wrote about my grandpa.

I showed Dad. I thought he'd be proud.

He was not.

*What? You wrote this? Why? What are you trying to prove?*

Nothing.

For the first time, nothing. I'm just writing about life.

But you should keep that private. It's too revealing and distressing. It's not... Sublime.

I know.

It's. Not. Sublime.

I crumbled.

Then came the summer before my senior year. I finally read *The Joy Luck Club*.

In the entire novel, I didn't come across a single Cho Chang. What took the place of sublimity, instead, were real people. Mothers and daughters who breathe and hurt and love.

I laughed and cried and began to write.

Status: Not counting anymore.

I don't write to create the next Hermione, become the best cliché, or impress Mom and Dad. I write to express the thoughts that are most real to me, ones I cannot confine any longer.

I am real and I care about being real—that is my power, not just as a writer but as a person.

"We were impressed by Kaylee's ability to creatively relay important information about herself. The unique format of her essay suited the content and also showcased her passion for writing. What the essay did particularly well, though, was effectively explore experiences (both small and large) that shaped her growth as a person and writer. Her conclusion to write for herself, rather than to impress others, demonstrates her maturity and confidence. Through these anecdotes, we got a better idea of the kind of scholar she is outside the classroom—something not found anywhere else in the application."

—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

## UC ESSAY EXAMPLE #111: "TWO TRUTHS, ONE LIE"

*On the first day of school, when a teacher plays "Two Truths, One Lie" I always state living in three different continents. Nine times out of ten, this is picked as the lie.*

*I spent my primary education years in Bangalore, India. The Indian education system emphasizes skills like handwriting and mental math. I learnt how to memorize and understand masses of information in one sitting. This method is rote in comparison to critical thinking, but has encouraged me to look beyond classroom walls, learning about the rivers of Eastern Europe and the history of mathematics.*

*During seventh grade, I traded India's Silicon Valley for the suburban Welwyn Garden City, UK. Aside from using Oxford Dictionary spellings and the metric system, I found little to no similarities between British and Indian curricula. I was exposed to "Religious Studies" for the first time, as well as constructional activities like textiles and baking. I found these elements to be an enhancing supplement to textbooks and notes. Nevertheless, the elementary level of study frustrated me. I was prevented from advancing in areas I showed aptitude for, leading to a lack of enthusiasm. I was ashamed and tired of being the only one to raise my hand. Suddenly, striving for success had negative connotations.*

*Three years later, I began high school in Oakland, California. US education seemed to have the perfect balance between creative thinking, core subjects and achievement. However, it does have its share of fallacies in comparison to my experience in other systems. I find that my classmates rarely learn details about cultures outside of these borders until very late in their career. The emphasis on multiple choice testing and the weight of letter grades has deterred curiosity.*

*In only seventeen years, I have had the opportunity to experience three very different educational systems. Each has shaped me into a global citizen and prepared me for a world whose borders are growing extremely defined. My perspective in living amongst different cultures has provided me with insight on how to understand various opinions and thus form a comprehensive plan to*



reach resolution.

## UC ESSAY EXAMPLE #12

***In 10th and 11th grade, I explored the world of China with my classmates through feasts of mapo tofu, folk games and calligraphy. As I developed a familial bond with my classmates and teacher, the class became a chance to discover myself. As a result, I was inspired to take AP Chinese.***

***But there was a problem: my small school didn't offer AP Chinese.***

***So I took matters into my own hands. I asked my AP advisor for a list of other advisors at schools near me, but he didn't have one. I emailed the College Board, who told me they couldn't help, so I visited the websites of twenty other high schools and used the information available to find an advisor willing to let me test at his or her school. I emailed all the advisors I could find within a fifty-mile radius.***

***But all I got back were no's.***

***I asked myself: Why was I trying so hard to take an AP test?***

***After some thought, I realized the driving force behind my decision wasn't academic. I'd traveled to Taiwan in the past, but at times I felt like an outsider because I could not properly communicate with my family. I wanted to be able to hear my grandpa's stories in his own tongue about escaping from China during the revolution. I wanted to buy vegetables from the lady at the market and not be known as a visitor. I wanted to gossip with my cousins about things that didn't just occur during my visit. I wanted to connect.***

***Despite the lack of support I received from both my school and the College Board, I realized that if I truly wanted this, I'd have to depend on myself. So I emailed ten more advisors and, after weeks, I finally received a 'maybe' telling me to wait until midnight to register as a late tester. At 12:10 am on April 19, I got my yes.***

***Language is not just a form of communication for me. Through, Chinese I connect with my heritage, my people, and my country.***

## UC PERSONAL INSIGHT QUESTION

## PROMPT 5: OVERCOMING A CHALLENGE

**Prompt:** Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?

### UC ESSAY EXAMPLE #13: “BREAKING UP WITH MOM”

*When I was fifteen years old I broke up with my mother. We could still be friends, I told her, but I needed my space, and she couldn't give me that.*

*She and I both knew that I was the only person that she had in America. Her family was in Russia, she only spoke to her estranged ex-husband in court, her oldest son avoided her at all costs. And yet, at fifteen years old, I wasn't equipped to effectively calm her down from her nightly anxiety attacks. At forty-three, she wasn't willing to believe that I did love her, but that I couldn't be responsible for stabilizing her life.*

*Moving in with my dad full time felt like I was abandoning her after tying a noose around her neck. But as my Drama teacher (and guardian angel) pointed out, my mother wasn't going to get better if I kept enabling her, and that I wasn't going to be able to grow if I was constrained by her dependence on me.*

*For the first time, I had taken action. I was never again going to passively let life happen to me.*

*During four long months of separation, I filled the space that my mom previously dominated with learning: everything and anything. I taught myself French through online programs, built websites, and began editing my drawings on Photoshop to sell them online. When my dad lost his third job in five years, I learned to sew my own clothes and applied my new knowledge to costume design in the Drama Department.*

*On stage, I learned to empathize. Backstage, I worked with teams of dedicated and mutually supportive students. In our improv group, I gained the confidence to act on my instincts. With the help of my Drama teacher, I learned to humble myself enough to ask for help.*

*On my sixteenth birthday, I picked up the phone and dialed my mom. I waited through three agonizingly long pauses between rings.*

*“Katyush?”*

*“Hi mom, it’s me.”*