Planning Your College Essay

The Big Picture

Writing your college essay is no different than writing any other essay. It must be **focused, clear, engaging, compelling, and personal (meaning it reveals something about you—not that it must contain excessive personal details!)**. As you plan, keep in mind that admissions officers are reading thousands of essays. They have heard every travel story, life changing volunteer experience, and challenging situation in the book. What will make your essay stand out more than anything else is the quality, clarity and focus of your writing. Above all—the essay **must leave the admissions officer feeling as if they know YOU better than he/she did before they read it.**

Step 1: How to get started

1) **Read the essay question carefully and think: "What is this asking me to write about?"** You can be creative to some extent of course, but ultimately you must address the precise question asked.
2) **Brainstorm some possible experiences or events in your life that might lend themselves to answering the question.** This does **not** have to be some "huge event" (travel abroad, dramatic situation, etc). Often the best essays are about everyday life or habits, and writing about a "huge event" often ends up being more about the event than about YOU.

Step 2: What's the big takeaway?

1) **Determine 2-3 of the experiences/events that seem particularly compelling.**
2) **Think: "*Based on the question I'm answering, and the experience I've chosen to write about, what is the one big takeaway that I want my admissions officer to have after reading this*?**
    a. Note: this step is absolutely critical. If you can't summarize the main idea/major takeaway of your essay in 1 sentence or less, then chances are you need to narrow your idea down.
    b. Make sure your "big takeaway" reveals something important **about you** and **not about the experience/event**. (I.e. a big takeaway must let the admissions officer understand you better as a person—if you are writing about a trip abroad, your essay can't just be about how cool it was to go abroad—that doesn't teach the admissions officer anything about you!)
3) **You should have a list of 2-3 possible essay topics along with a 1 sentence or shorter "big takeaway" summary for each.** Now think—are any of these "speaking to me" more than others?

Step 3: Put Pencil to Paper!

1) **Start with a free-flowing brainstorm**—what are your strongest memories about this event/experience? What impact has it had on you? Why is it important? What does it show about you? I recommend pencil and paper here—go old fashioned to capture ALL your thoughts.
2) **Review your notes to find the most compelling ideas and snippets about this experience/event**. Use these to create a rough outline of your essay.
3) **Get writing!** Don't agonize over starting with a perfect catchy line—if you are struggling to get started, begin with your body paragraphs, and then go back to the opening later.

2024-2025 Common Application essay topics (650 required word limit): www.commonapp.org

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.

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?

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

4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?

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

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?

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.

OPTIONAL COMMUNITY DISRUPTION QUESTION:

Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.

Do you wish to share anything on this topic? Y/N
Please use this space to describe how these events have impacted you.

The question will be optional and will appear in the Additional Information section of the application. The response length will be limited to 250 words. Examples might include:

- Illness or loss within your family or support network
- Employment or housing disruptions within your family
- Food insecurity
- Toll on mental and emotional health
- New obligations such as part-time work or care for siblings or family members
- Availability of computer or internet access required to continue your studies
- Access to a safe and quiet study space
- A new direction for your major or career interests