

Understanding the College Essay

Essay Prompt Analysis:

1. **Read** all of the prompts
2. **Eliminate** the least interesting prompts
3. **Select** one prompt to focus on
4. **Annotate** for key words/ phrases
5. **Rephrase** the prompt (in your own words)

2020-2021 Common Application Prompts

Directions: Read all of the prompts. Eliminate the least interesting topics. Leave no more than 2-3 prompts as final options.

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, 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. 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 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.
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 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.

Select

Directions: From your remaining two to three prompts, **select** one prompt to focus on. As you're trying to pick a prompt, it may help to think about personal experiences/ interests that you could write about. Remember, what you share should help colleges get to know you better. Copy and paste your selected prompt below.

Prompt Selection:

Annotate

Directions: Go back to your selected prompt and **annotate** it by highlighting or bolding key words and phrases (verbs and nouns).

Rephrase

Directions: Now that you have annotated your prompt, **rephrase** the prompt in your own words. You can also think of this as summarizing the question.

Rephrase:

Brainstorming:

- Use pen & paper
- Write short phrases and key words
- Avoid sentences
- List key life events or activities
- Write out adjectives that describe you
- What would make a good story?

Suggested Activity: Set a timer for 5 minutes and write down as many things that relate to your chosen topic as you can!

Writing Tips:

- Write in a document, not on your application
- Write first, edit second
- Too much > too little
- Don't just change the name of colleges in your essays
- Break into multiple paragraphs
- Don't be afraid to start from scratch
- Save your document often!

Suggested Activity: Map out the story you're going to tell in your essay. You can use a simplified Freytag's Pyramid structure (background information, complication/ conflict, climax, resolution/ realization), or you can simply sketch out the who, what, when, where, how, and why.

Editing Advice:

- Ask a trusted reader.
 - Ask them to summarize your essay.
 - Does their summary match the topic you intended to write about?
 - Was anything unclear?
Does this help them understand you better?
 - Is it in your voice?
 - Did you forget anything important?
- Lay off the Thesaurus!
- Analyze content first.
- Edit for spelling, grammar, punctuation, and syntax last!
- Sleep on it.
- Is this the real you?

Suggested Activities:

1. The day after you write your response, edit your essay by reading it out loud. If anything sounds awkward or confusing, tweak it until it sounds clear and logical.
2. Circle any noticeable words that you repeat in a paragraph or in multiple paragraphs. You may want to use a thesaurus (sparingly) to help you with word variance. *Ex. Rather than using "impactful" three times, you might use "impactful," "transformational" and "insightful."*

Final Reminders

- Any topic can be a good topic if done well.
- Any topic can be a bad topic if done poorly.
- Tell your story. Use your voice.
- Don't procrastinate!
- Check formatting before submitting.
- Take deep breaths.
- Your worth is NOT determined by your college acceptances.