



present

THE GREAT COLLEGE ESSAY PROJECT

ALL ABOUT COLLEGE ESSAYS

Common App has announced that the essay prompts for the 2020-2021 application year **will remain the same** as the prompts for the previous year. These prompts include:

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.*

In addition, the Common App is providing an optional “common” question, located in the Additional Information section of your application, which will give students the opportunity to **write about how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected them as people and students**. Here is the additional Covid-19 question that students will see on the Common App:

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.*

This question is **optional** and students will be limited to **250 words** in their response. This question can be found under Additional Information in the application. You can find more information and resources on Covid-19’s impact on college application season (including changes to deposit deadlines, standardized testing updates, and a virtual college fair)

During the 2018-2019 application year, the most popular topic of choice was: “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.” (24.1%). The next most popular topics were: “Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.” (23.7%), followed by “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?” (21.1%).

A WORD ABOUT AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

Audience and purpose are key considerations at every stage of the process. This may be the first time that students have written for strangers, and this will almost certainly be the first time they've written with the real and scary goal of getting into college.

College admissions officers face the daunting task of assessing enormous stacks of applications in a limited time frame. They are also human—they want to feel emotion and like students who apply. Written responses should be treated as an opportunity to add personality and depth to the application, much like an interview. Students don't need to be perfect, but they do need to be authentic, get straight to the point, and highlight instances of growth and success. Their writing must demonstrate how they will contribute to the freshman class. The question, "Does this help me build a case for my acceptance?" can be a helpful barometer for topic selection, where to elaborate or condense, etc.

WRITING TIPS FOR STUDENTS

- Relax.
 - Writing your college essay can be intimidating. In fact, it may be the first time you've ever written a personal essay, which is always a little bit scary. Try to remember that every high school senior who is applying to college is in the same boat--and remember: we're here to help! Hopefully that will make the process a little less daunting.
- Be honest.
 - Writing that is honest and personal draws the reader in. An admissions officer who reads hundreds of essays a day can almost always tell when an essay is dishonest or sounds like you're trying to be something you are not.
- Be personal.
 - When all's said and done, you want to be able to read your essay and say, "This sounds like ME."
- Be consistent.

- Your application and essay shouldn't be the same but they should reflect each other. This tip doesn't always work out--you may want to write about something that isn't even mentioned on your application--but don't contradict yourself by writing an essay about how being captain of the football team changed your life if you don't list football as one of your activities.
- Don't try to predict.
 - Don't try to guess what the admissions office is looking for and write to fit their format. Other than word count, limitations, and possible style rules (i.e. font, margins, etc.) there is no "format." They are looking for YOU. Think of your essay as an opportunity--your chance to tell a potential college something very important about you that they won't learn from your application.
- Keep an open mind when picking an essay topic.
 - An activity that you hated and are sure you never want to be involved in again may make a good essay topic because you learned an important lesson from it.
- Focus on your strong points.
 - Maybe writing isn't one of your strengths. That's okay. Not everyone who goes to college is destined to be an English major or a writer. The freshman class at every college is made up of all types of students. An admissions officer who reads essays has that in mind. Tell them, in your own voice, what you have to offer the freshman class.
- Proofread.
 - Use the dictionary, spell check, and read your essay aloud to yourself or someone you know. If you have time, put your essay away for a few days and come back to it with fresh eyes and ideas.
- Write about WHY, not WHAT.
 - Instead of writing about WHAT you did (your application does that), write about WHY you did it. Don't repeat your application. Expand on it. Tell the college something new.

BEST PRACTICES FOR POPULAR ESSAY TOPICS

- Relationships
 - This essay will be great if you:
 - Explain a path of discovery
 - Make personalities come alive
 - Create an essay about you, not someone else

- Travels
 - This essay will be great if you:
 - Take the reader on the trip with you
 - Use imagery
 - Are insightful and avoid clichés

- Obstacles
 - This essay will be great if you:
 - Avoid glorification; self-recognition
 - Explain how you handle the problems that stand in your way
 - Realize effort is often more impressive than victory

- Activities
 - This essay will be great if you:
 - List everything you do
 - Don't repeat your application
 - Personalize and analyze
 - Write about what you have really learned--not what you are supposed to learn

- Self-Descriptions
 - This essay will be great if you:
 - Avoid over-describing
 - Are realistic about the impact events have made on you (see Activities)
 - Truly answer the question

- Home Life
 - This essay will be great if you:

- Are honest and thoughtful, not just descriptive
 - Realize that what you may think is boring can be exciting when described vividly
- Realizations
 - This essay will be great if you:
 - Are thoughtful, sensitive, responsive, and indicate change and growth
 - Realize that one incident rarely changes someone completely, but can be used to express change
 - Are realistic, not contrived
- The Thoughtful Essay
 - This essay will be great if you:
 - Can demonstrate intellectual curiosity
 - Use tangible examples
 - Leave your own perspective
- Offbeat
 - This essay will be great if you:
 - Are lively
 - Are brave
 - Use wit and let lots of people read it to confirm you are witty
 - Avoid being: Inappropriate, Obnoxious, Not funny

COLLEGE ESSAY NO-NOS (AND OTHER HELPFUL TIPS)

Below is a list of ten essay topics to avoid. Some of these topics contain subject matter or ideas that are inappropriate for college applications. Others are extremely popular topics; if you choose one of these, you won't stand out from the other applicants when the admission officer reads your essay.

- Your relationship with your girlfriend or boyfriend (or how it ended)
- Your religious beliefs
- Your political views
- Sex
- How great you are

- The importance of a college education
- Your SAT scores
- Big ideas that you have not given much thought to before
- “The Best Game of My Life” or another athletic incident written in a glib style
- Your trip abroad, unless truly noteworthy

There are always exceptions, and some students can create enough context and detail that the reader does come away knowing something important about the writer.

Make sure that you do not use clichés in your college essay (e.g. “My hard work really paid off”; “It made me who I am today.”) Tutors can help you spot any clichés that you may have used in your essay.

Avoid using words that sound like they were plucked out of the thesaurus. The admission officers know that you are a high school senior, and they want to hear your words. Two examples of words that are overused in college essay applications are plethora and epiphany.

Pay attention to your beginnings, and make sure they are strong. An essay about swimming or crew might begin with an alarm clock sound (Brrrrrrrrring!), but this beginning doesn’t tell much about the student’s experience or observations.

Please don’t:

- Write about the death of a relative you didn’t know very well for the dramatic impact.
- Write about a dead relative you did know well without saying anything about yourself.
- Keep your writing at a superficial level without letting it come from the heart. (Team sport essays are at high risk here)
- Choose a topic you don’t feel passionate about.
- Not answer the question (VERY IMPORTANT).
- Let anyone else add their “voice” to your writing.
- Choose a deeply personal topic to write about (parents’ messy divorce, coming out in high school, sexual abuse) without getting feedback from a trusted adult. This is the hardest part of choosing a topic - knowing when a topic is just too personal and revealing, although it is of great importance to you.

Perhaps the biggest pitfall is blowing off the essay because you think, “no one really reads them.” Not true! A good essay can boost an application that may otherwise not stand out in a field of highly qualified and competitive applicants.

STUDENT WRITING CHECKLIST

- Does this essay focus on your life, and does it highlight your growth as a person?

It is common to write an essay about how a parent, or a how mentor influenced your own life. However, the essay is ultimately about YOU.

- Does this essay explain the process of your development as a person? Does it explain HOW you came to grow?

It is easy to say that when you began high school you were shy, and now as a senior you are confident. However, the reader needs to understand how you've grown.

- Are you telling the truth throughout your essay?

It is easy to fall into the trap of writing what you think the person reading your essay would like to hear. Your essay doesn't have to end with a life changing epiphany. Humility gives a human element to your essay.

- Did you use 'I' statements throughout your essay?

It is essential to own your experience. The college essay is a personal narrative. Using the first person gives your voice authority.

- Do the other individuals in your essay have a voice?

When we can hear the voice of someone else in your essay, it is easier to understand your relationship to them. For example, avoid, "My mother told me..." Instead, insert dialogue to help place the reader in the scene.

- Are your tenses consistent in your essay?

Yes, it is possible to have different tenses in your essay, such as in a flashback or talking about future plans, but make sure they are consistent. It is easy for readers to lose the timeline of your story if you mix up tenses.

- ❑ Does your essay give the reader a sense of how your story/experience will play a role in your future?

Ultimately, colleges are thinking about how you are going to fit into their community. Does your essay mention how you will use what you learned in the future?

- ❑ Are you repeating information from other parts of your college essay?

Remember that you are trying to give as full a picture of yourself as possible, and the essay allows you the opportunity to showcase a side of you that doesn't fit in a box.

- ❑ Are there clichés and/or general statements?

Every word, every sentence needs to say something specific about you. That means no clichéd sentences and no general statements, such as: I'm a hard worker; I am determined to do my best; I am a person who likes to help others. These are valid statements, but you need to make sure you are using examples to prove this and to explain the significance. Use the "show not tell" method by asking a lot of questions for every general statement. Keeping asking questions and offering your analysis of what they share with you to turn a general statement into an informative sentence.

- ❑ Are there lingering questions?

If you read the essay and can ask "why?" to any sentence, that means you need to explain more. With limited word counts, you will have to shrink down big ideas into more concise sentences that don't leave the reader guessing about any of the content.

SAMPLE ESSAY #1

What to look out for...

- *Pay close attention to the author's introduction and how she introduces "jigida." The waistband is used as a symbol. What does it represent?*
- *Pay attention to the dialogue used in this essay. As a reader, do you feel the dialogue helps you understand the situation better?*
- *How does the author show her vulnerability in this essay? Do her feelings about womanhood change? How does she show this?*
- *Think about whether or not the ending is effective. Is the author's tone different in the beginning of the essay when compared to the end?*
- *Think about how the author discovered her voice and began to become liberated. What*

inspired her to find her voice?

jigida

My womanhood began the day my mother gifted me with a *jigida*: a Nigerian waistband of multicolored beads handcrafted from a baobab tree and woven through a thin thread that would be draped around the narrowest part of my torso. Wearing the *jigida* was my rite of passage. Its thread connected me to the vast tapestry of West African culture, each bead representing the women who came before me. With my lineage laying at my waist, my mother cautioned me in Igbo, “mebie ya, mebie ndu gi” - break the beads, you break your life.

I truly felt the consequences of the *jigida* when it would pinch my skin whenever I moved too quickly. Its purpose was to limit my actions to delicate movements befitting a proper woman. I was aware of my every movement and how soft-spoken I had become. I associated my femininity with the suppression of my real voice. The *jigida* was proof to me that women had to live a restrictive life. So, I questioned what it *truly* meant to be a woman.

Restriction seemed synonymous with my womanhood until I started performing poetry. My voice was low and shaky but remained certain of the space it held. As I performed, I saw the faces of women in the audience. Their eyes glimmered in the spotlight with smiles that stretched across their faces like crescent moons. Their smiles and snaps validated my newly discovered confidence in my voice.

Until then, I had never been on a platform that allowed me to speak so freely without being reminded to lower my voice. In that moment I was uncertain of whether it was the *jigida* or my poetry that gave birth to my womanhood. And yet, despite my newfound liberation, I felt uncomfortable performing poetry while I wore the *jigida*. I felt as if I were being pulled in two directions: one freeing and the other constricting. I realized that I could define my own femininity. It was a revelation that I found in the gaps of the *jigida* beads and the spaces between my poetic line breaks.

I rushed home and took hold of the *jigida*, with hands grasping onto the thread, pulling it in separate directions, stretching it as far and hard as I could. My subconscious fought my culture's definition of a woman. I refused to abandon this new understanding of my womanhood. I yearned for my culture to validate my muliebrity but not at the cost of restricting my body, my words, and my thoughts. This left me with a dilemma: would breaking the beads allow me to be a Nigerian woman and a feminine poet at the same time?

Before I could gather my thoughts, the thread snapped and the beads scattered, like wooden raindrops dancing at my feet. There it was: the breaking of my culture, "the breaking of my life." The *jigida* no longer represented the collective of all the women in my family. Each bead now stood for each individual woman.

My femininity should have been cradled by a culture that celebrates depth and individuality, but it was not. Through poetry I found the platform to celebrate all that makes me, an independent woman and a proud Nigerian. My writing is a testimony that

one can embrace their culture while coming to terms with their own identity— how they want to define it. I celebrate my attributes while blending in the essence of Nigerian womanhood, and because of this, I can forge my own story. A story that I hope can be embraced by other women who are trying to break the confines of cultural expectations. My goal is to empower young women to seek higher education, so they may liberate themselves like the cascading beads of my *jigida*. Hopefully, they will follow their passions, like I did with poetry, with every boundary—or bead— they break.

SAMPLE ESSAY #2

What to look out for...

- *Think about how the author sets the mood for the reader in the beginning of the essay. What feelings does it evoke? Are you yearning to read more?*
- *How does the author use sequence and detail in her essay to hook the reader?*
- *How does the author describe perspiration in the essay?*
- *Describe how the author used her mom's experience as a teachable moment in her life.*

I reluctantly opened the door, and instantly saw my cousin in tears. I knew we hadn't won. One by one, we all stepped in to comfort my mom. In that moment, I didn't want to see the tears running down her face. I couldn't face the pain in her eyes; I just wasn't ready. Soon enough, I was the last person in the office.

Ten months ago, my mother launched her campaign for Boston City Council. I was thrilled to finally see someone running who looks like me, who has similar struggles as me, and someone who can, therefore, represent me. She didn't have thousands saved up, or parents who were politicians; rather, her dreams and her resilience were the foundation

of her campaign. It was finally time to defy the status quo and show people you can be more than your circumstances. Yes, she's Muslim, a former refugee from Somalia, and a single mother of four, but she is more than this.

When we first started campaigning, I canvassed in the heat, the rain, in any circumstance. Canvassing and talking to voters made me feel extremely vulnerable. Some people loved the idea of my mother's campaign, while others slammed their doors in our faces because they would never vote for a Muslim. Despite how I was affected by the negative criticism, I didn't let it change how I viewed myself or my identity.

From the campaign, I learned to never apologize for who I am. My mother and I both wear the hijab, and we made the decision to put my mother wearing it as her campaign photo. At first, I was hesitant because wearing the hijab causes some people to categorize us as "the Muslims", overlooking our character. Ultimately, we printed thousands of pamphlets confidently signifying that we are proud Muslims.

Halfway through the campaign, I became an adult, or at least paid bills like one. It was time for me to step up; being the oldest child, I knew I had to pull my weight. My mother was unemployed, so I got a part-time job which quickly turned into a full-time job. Somedays, I would come home with swollen feet from working eight-hour shifts only to later go canvassing for hours. Yet, I pushed myself to balance my responsibilities and prioritize what was most important to me.

As I walked out the door and down the stairs, my eyes met my mother's. Knowing all the struggles we've been through, I felt terrible that our dreams hadn't become a

reality. I immediately broke down into tears. Tears of rage towards everyone who promised to vote and didn't. Tears of guilt from feeling like I hadn't tried hard enough. Tears of defeat because this campaign made me feel like I had a place in society. I began asking myself: Was all this hard work for nothing? After seven months of knocking on doors in the rain, walking for miles with blistering feet, sleeping late, juggling school and work, we still lost the campaign.

Looking back at this experience, although my mom didn't win, this opportunity allowed me to recognize the need for more minority women running for office. Boston Globe's recent series, "Boston. Racism. Image. Reality," sheds light on politics in Boston. The article states that "even though we're a majority-minority city, we're still white dominated." I have acknowledged that there are strikes against me not only as a Muslim, but also as a woman, and as a person of color. However, I'm learning that my markers of identity don't have to be seen as limitations. I have learned that accepting failure allows for growth. This experience has allowed me to develop into someone who doesn't let the fear of the unknown stop them from achieving their true potential. I don't want the circumstances I was born with to define me, but rather, use them to further drive me.

SAMPLE ESSAY #3

The last example includes a first and final draft of the same Personal Statement. What to look out for...

- *How did the changes made in the final draft make the author's essay stronger?*

- *What details were removed, and why?*
- *How does the author reframe the same details to make the essay more about her own personal growth?*
- *What important qualities did you learn about the author through this personal narrative of her family's history?*
- *Identify some techniques that might have been used by the tutor during the revision process to help make the essay stronger.*

First Draft

I was born and raised by my mother and stepfather in South Los Angeles with three younger sisters. My mother divorced my father when I was four years old because he was abusive and a cheater. By order of the judge I was supposed to see him every other weekend but I chose not to. The person I am today is because of all the things done to my mom and I by my dad and by his family. I became strong, independent, motivated, and loving with the help of those who really love me.

As a child I witnessed my dad treat my mom as if she was just a maid and his family treated her just the same. They bossed her around and gossiped about her all the time and I thought it was just a normal thing adults did until I saw my dad hit my mom then I felt in my heart that something was really wrong. Even now I am seventeen years old and he still doesn't admit to what he did, he always says, "You were just a baby, you're making it up just like your mom." Well no I wasn't, I remember how it happened and I can tell you like it was just yesterday. I mean come on; you just don't get thrown in jail for no apparent

reason. From that day on I knew not to let myself be bossed around, not to let myself get hit by anyone, and not to let myself be scared to stand up for myself.

Being around him was difficult but being around him and his family was a challenge. Once the divorce was final the family made me feel like I wasn't part of the family. When I was younger I was told I was ugly, fat, dumb, and I shouldn't read anymore because it was going to get me nowhere. As I got older they wanted me to learn all of our family traditions and learn to cook instead of focusing on school. The more I refused the more of a "rebel child" I became. I've always talked about college and once I hit my teenage years I couldn't stop talking about college and my family being so old school hated that I wanted to go to the east coast to study instead of staying home and becoming what we call today a housewife.

I was bribed and yelled at so I can decide to just stop my education at a high school degree and my father did not stop them at all. I stood up for myself and he just sat back let the family try to tear me apart. My family loathed so bad that one Christmas I asked for books, any books it didn't matter what I just wanted to read but instead as a joke a got an apron, a knitting set, and some gloves. Now this of course did hurt but I didn't let them get to me, I took the gifts gladly and bought my own books. The more they told me I wasn't going to do anything with my life the more I stood up taller and made it a goal to prove them all wrong.

Living with my mom and stepdad was much easier and less stressful. Anything I wanted to do, they supported me and didn't judge me. They pushed me away from the old

housewife tradition and pushed me toward the books. For as I can remember my mom always told me “College isn’t an option, it’s a must.”

From there on my goal has been to go to Brown University or Rutgers and become a pediatrician or a psychologist, maybe even a businesswoman. My stepdad taught me how to toughen up and not let any men put me or hold me down. He taught me how to never give up and walk away on something that means so much to me. Finally, he taught me the importance of family. I learned that even though things get hard and you argue, family is always there and you should always keep them close because you only get one.

I want to go to college and come back home to tell my sisters how great it is and help them through the whole college progress. I want them to have the same experience or maybe an even better one. I want to be a strong female role model for my sisters. Through the divorce and crazy family I have I’ve learned that I want to be something great. Not only to prove them wrong and make my mom and stepdad proud but to have the feeling of accomplishment in the end. To be able to look back and say that I did it and no one can take that from me.

Final Draft

Que la chingada estas a sonido con ese ve a limpiar. Growing up I always had one aunt nagging me about why I wasn’t cleaning or why I was sitting around reading with my cousins. My family always had their own conservative state of mind while mine became more liberal and somewhat rebellious.

When I was younger I was told I was ugly, fat, dumb, and that I shouldn't read anymore because it was going to get me nowhere. As I got older my family wanted me to learn all of our family traditions and learn to cook instead of focusing on school. The more I refused, the more of a "rebel child" I became. I've always talked about college and my family being so old school hated that I wanted to go far was to study instead of becoming what we call today a housewife.

I was bribed to stop my education at high school. And there was no stopping the verbal abuse. My family loathed education so bad that one Christmas I asked for books, but as a joke I got an apron, a knitting set, and cleaning gloves. Now this of course did hurt, but I didn't let them get to me, I took the gifts gladly and bought my own books. The more they told me I wasn't going to do anything with my life the more I stood up taller and made it a goal to prove them all wrong.

Although most of my family never favored education, my mother disagreed. She took classes at Cal State Fullerton and told me that the college life was "an experience that everyone should have." She always said how being around people with different backgrounds and their different world views helped her open her eyes to what she wanted to do. Once she finished all her classes and got a new job, I saw the difference in her every morning. Instead of dragging herself to work, she has so much excitement about her job. College was implanted in my brain probably since I was probably about 5 years old, and even now I still hear my mom say "College isn't an option, it's a must."

Just the day after my mother gave me this great talk about college, I witnessed my dad hit my mother. As soon as I saw that I knew that it was wrong and that I didn't want anyone doing that to her again or to me. My father always imposed his views on her and never let my mother say anything. This showed me how I never want someone to impose their beliefs on me. I think for myself.

I want to go to college and come back home to tell my sisters how great it is to be around other people that think differently. I want to be educated and strong. I want to find my own path.