

COLLEGE ESSAY WORKSHOP

Writing a Memorable Essay about Memorable YOU

(THIS IS FUN)

Is the essay important? Yes.
It's the perfect place in
your application to be
uniquely & wonderfully *you*

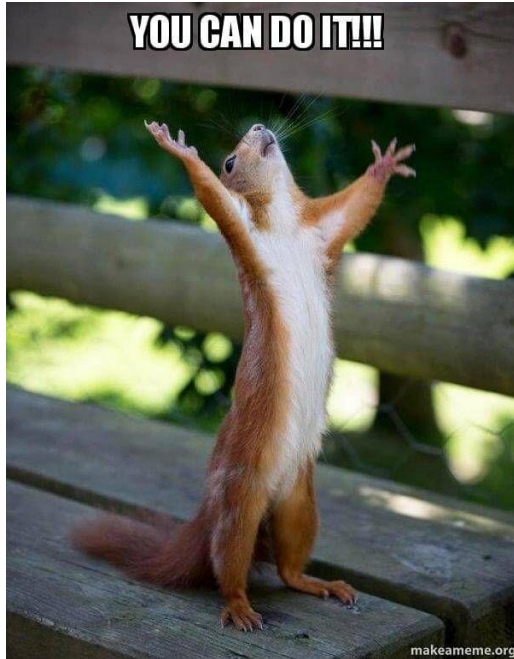
be you

2020-21 COMMON APP ESSAY PROMPTS

The 2020-21 Common Application essay prompts are below. These are shortened versions, so check the website for the full prompts. Share a draft with a trusted reader. Accept feedback.

1. Share the story of your background, identity, interest, or talent.
2. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. What did you learn?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea.
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve.
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging it makes you lose all track of time.
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice.

(TAKEN FROM) APPS 101: TEN TIPS FOR AN EPIC COLLEGE ESSAY



BY JEFF SCHIFFMAN
DIRECTOR OF ADMISSION
TULANE UNIVERSITY
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TUADMISSIONJEFF.BLOGSPOT.COM

(LARA NAUGHTON'S NOTE: IT'S SO GOOD, WHY REINVENT THE WHEEL? THANK YOU, JEFF SCHIFFMAN!)

PICK A TOPIC THAT YOU ENJOY WRITING ABOUT

Seems like a very obvious tip, right? Here is the easiest way I can frame this one for you: If you are writing your essay and it's coming together pretty naturally, you're kinda vibing with it as you write it and it makes you happy as you're wrapping it up... that is probably how we are going to feel as we are reading it. If writing this feels off, if expanding on your selected topic feels forced or it leaves you not-so-happy with the outcome.... well, that is how we are going to feel when we read it.

(Lara Naughton's note: Make a list of what makes you happy. Make a list of what makes you lose track of time. Make a list of what challenges you. Is anything on all three lists? That might be a good topic!)

SOMETIMES THE SIMPLEST TOPICS ARE THE BEST ONES

You don't have to dig for tragedy. You don't have to have some life-changing experience or express your impassioned worldviews. Some of the best essays I've read have been on the most simple of topics. What is it like to eat dinner with your family on Sunday night? What was your first concert like (remember those?) Most memorable road trip? We love these simple yet personal topics. By the same token, if you *have* had a pretty challenging experience in life, don't feel pressured to bring it up in your application, especially if doing so brings you back into that difficult time in life. Your school counselor can detail any situation in your life that you'd prefer not to relive in their recommendation.

(Lara Naughton's note: Feel free to talk with me if you're unsure how/if to focus on a topic.)

TELL A GOOD STORY

Most people prefer reading a good story over anything else. So... tell a great story in your essay. Worry less about providing as many details about yourself as possible and more about captivating the reader's attention inside of a great narrative. I read a great essay this year where an applicant walked me through the steps of meditation and how your body responds to it. Loved it. (yes I'll admit I'm a predisposed meditation fan) The human brain best-remembers great stories over anything else.

(Lara Naughton's note: What's the last story involving you that you couldn't wait to tell your best friend? Your grandmother? Your teacher? Your pet? Retell it. Set the scene. Provide detail, self-reflection, and insight.)

BE AWARE OF THE LIGHT-SWITCH ESSAY AND BE COGNIZANT OF YOUR OWN PERSONAL PRIVILEGES

These essays usually read something like this: "I went to do this service project in my community thinking I was going to change the kids lives ... and they ended up changing mine!!" Nothing is particularly wrong, per se, but the light switch essay (where things start one way and then totally change in a different way) can sometimes trap you and come across as inauthentic. Also, we talk frequently about privilege and savior complex here at Tulane, and we hope as an applicant, you can be in touch with your own awareness of these as well.

(Lara Naughton's note: You *can* convey deeply moving experiences. Just do it with honesty & awareness)

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO ALL WORK OUT AT 17

We want your essay to come full circle, but we don't expect you to have life figured out by the time senior year kicks off. Life will always have its ups and downs and that is totally okay. We don't want you necessarily ending your essay leaving us with concerns for your well-being, but ending with an optimistic tone while still knowing the best is yet to come is great too.

(Lara Naughton's note: It's okay to have a question that hasn't been answered yet. That's what college is for...to help you answer some of your big questions!)

DON'T BRAG... TOO MUCH

We've got a great list of your extracurricular activities and some glowing letters of recommendation on your behalf. So, no need to self-promote too much in the essay. Some of my favorite essays have been humble, authentic, and honest. We don't need a list of your accomplishments here; we'd rather read a story behind a time when maybe getting to one of those accomplishments wasn't as easy for you.

(Lara Naughton's note: One way to make sure you're not bragging too much is to share the challenge as well as the success of an experience.)

AVOID APPLICATION REDUNDANCY

If you've chose to use the "expand on one extracurricular activity" section to talk about tennis, and your tennis coach has written us a great letter of recommendation, and your counselor mentions how much of a star you are on the tennis team... what do you think your essay should be about? Anything but tennis! We want to see consistency and fluidity in your application, but your essay should introduce us to a new side of you and a different dimension not seen in another part of the application.

(Lara Naughton's note: Your applications will likely be very arts centered. That's okay, just use the essay to reveal an insight, or something new and personal, even if it's about your art!)

USE YOUR AUTHENTIC VOICE

We know what the voice of a 17 year old sounds like. It sounds a lot different from the voice of a 45 year old. Write in your own voice and avoid using grandiloquent words like adumbrate or laconic (see what I did there?) If you're ever wondering what your authentic voice sounds like, take a few days to free-form write in a journal about your day and what's on your mind. Or speak your essay into your phone and record it. That is your voice. Bring it into your essay.

(Lara Naughton's note: After you record yourself talking about a topic you care about, transcribe the recording word for word. Save the turns of phrase that are unique to you. How you say something when you're excited about the topic is often the most illuminating and exciting for the reader!

HAVE A THEME, SOMEWHERE IN THERE

A great format of your essay: Part one; hint at whatever theme or message your essay will conclude. Part two: tell a great story that illustrates that theme. Part three: circle back to the theme in a clear and powerful way that ties the story into it. Done. See? Simple as that.

(Lara Naughton's note: As an exercise, try writing down three events/moments from your life that are meaningful and memorable to you. Make sure at least one happened within the past year. Now consider: What connects the three events? What about you was consistent in all three? What about you changed? Is there a theme that threads them together?)

DON'T WRITE ENTIRELY ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

...Quite literally, every single high school senior on planet earth is going through this experience. Certainly, many of you have had your life forever altered by this pandemic. But I will candidly say that come November, if we get 15,000 essays about it, it will be super tough to stand out....

Maybe this moment of pause has given you a different worldview? A different academic passion?...You've also got an opportunity to mention your corona experiences in a new specifically dedicated Coronavirus section on the Common App...Go forth and prosper, essay writers!

(End of Jeff Schiffman's blog post.)

STEPS: THE TIME IS NOW

1. Brainstorm. Be honest. Look beyond the surface aspects of your life. What matters to you? If someone is to truly know you, they'd have to know...
2. Write a first draft: Don't worry about how messy or unfocused it is, just write!
3. Write a second draft: Tie your ideas together; know why you're sharing this story. What is your essay revealing about you?
4. Share your essay with a trusted reader. Accept feedback.
5. Write the final draft.
6. Celebrate!

