

Strut Your Strengths

College Essay Seminar



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Choosing Your Topic

Family related issues can make wonderful essay topics. Here are some questions to start you thinking about your family life and how it has shaped you. These questions can trigger some terrific ideas to develop in your personal essay.

1. List family experiences that have had an effect on you? How have these experiences helped you to grow?

(To answer this question, you need to think about how your family has helped to shape you into the person you are today. Some of the family situations you could list include):

---being an only child or one of many

---having a mother who has recently gone to work

---moving from town to town

---participating in a family activity or tradition such as an annual trip or holiday celebration.

2. Which of your parents' traits would you most like to imitate?

(Here's another way to help you identify the kind of person you are. Thinking about your parents and their character traits can help you identify some your values and where they came from. You might realize, for example, that your internal social work originates from your mother's concern for the welfare of others.)

Many colleges would like to know about the non-credit programs you may have participated in, such as: summer music programs, sports camps, language programs, art or travel-study programs. These questions can trigger some ideas.

1. Why did you participate in these programs?

(You might be tempted to say, "I thought this program would be fun" or "I had nothing else to do." But that clearly is not enough. You need to focus on what specifically appealed to you, such as: developing a special interest, exploring a new field, or being on your own away from home.)

2. Did these programs influence you in any way?

(When you answer this question, think about what you learned or how you changed as a result of the program.)

Extracurricular activities can tell admissions officials how you spend some of your time when you are not in class. Think about your extracurricular, community, religious, and family activities that make a positive statement about you.

1. Which activities have you consistently participated in (for at least two consecutive years)?

(The way you spend your time outside of the classroom can tell you something about yourself. Sometimes these insights can generate ideas for an essay.)

2. What originally attracted you to these activities?

(As you think about why you joined an activity and chose to continue with it, look for trends or similarities. For example, you may have joined the band and the football team because you like to contribute to a group effort.)

3. What made you try them?

(Perhaps your new involvement can point to a change in your outlook or personal circumstances. For example, a move to a new school might have given you a chance to try activities not offered at your previous school.)

Your work experience can also tell admissions officials about the type of person you are. These questions will help to trigger some ideas for you.

1. Think about the jobs you have held. What did you like/dislike about your work experiences?

(Your answers to this question can provide some insight into the type of job situations are best suited to you. Think about an aspect of the job that was terrific--or horrible. Perhaps you loved or hated the repetition of crunching numbers on your calculator or you liked working in an office where so much was happening.)

Your college and career plans can show admissions committees that you have a sense of where you are going. These questions may trigger some thoughts about your future.

1. What is your intended college major?

(The answer to this question can tell you about your future career goals and what you want out of life. Perhaps you want to become a doctor so that you can help people or find the cure for cancer.)

Congratulations! You have just finished one of the most difficult steps in writing your essay: finding something to say. Based on what you have discovered about yourself, please use the space below to write down three possible topics you could develop into a personal essay.

Your essay should reflect your:

- genuine interest
- abilities and talents
- personal growth

Thinking Of Ideas to Write About

If you still can't think of any ideas to write about, try some of these popular do-it-yourself techniques for spawning ideas.

1. If your essay is not due for weeks or months, start a journal today! Record whatever catches your eye. Your honest images and thoughts may lead to a rich variety of ideas.
2. Try free-writing. That is, write nonstop for ten to fifteen minutes a day, paying no attention to grammar, spelling, or punctuation. You'll be amazed at how rapidly your ideas flow when you write without preplanning.
3. Focus your free-writing. Once you have done some free-writing, reread what you've written. Circle any idea or phrase you like or that holds promise for an essay topic.
4. Write down a list of items, like influential people in your life or books that you've read recently. A list of items may bring to mind just the topic you're looking for.
5. Create a time line of your life. Write down every event you can think of, whether you think it's important or not. A glance at your final list may turn up a variety of essay topics.

Writing Your Central Idea

Personal Qualities Colleges Look For In Applicants:

Read through the list of personal qualities colleges find desirable. Place a check in the box next to each quality you believe describes you.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seriousness of purpose | <input type="checkbox"/> Goal Oriented | <input type="checkbox"/> Intellectual Ability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mastery | <input type="checkbox"/> Intellectual Curiosity | <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Creativity | <input type="checkbox"/> Open-mindedness | <input type="checkbox"/> Maturity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Responsibility | <input type="checkbox"/> Trustworthiness | <input type="checkbox"/> Consideration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social Responsibility | <input type="checkbox"/> Integrity | <input type="checkbox"/> Initiative |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Enthusiasm | <input type="checkbox"/> Confidence | <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of Humor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Diligence | <input type="checkbox"/> Independence | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal Growth |

Showing Growth Over Time

Since colleges are particularly interested in students who can demonstrate how they have grown, the next step will help you to examine your personal qualities for signs on how you have developed over time. You can begin your timeline in your childhood, work your way through junior high years, and end in the present as a high school senior. Or you could focus entirely on your high school years beginning with the 9th grade to the 12th grade. Select two qualities and write them down in the appropriate places. Then, for each quality, write down examples that show your growth in that area.

For example: Suppose you would like to show how you have become more confident over time. You might start out telling how in 9th grade you rarely raised your hand in class because you weren't sure of yourself. You could move on to grade 10th through 11th when you decided to overcome your problem using examples on how you asserted yourself. Finally, as a senior, you could discuss how you feel much more comfortable in groups.

Great Beginnings

With a good beginning, you can wake up your readers and get them to focus on you in a positive way. To achieve this result, your beginning must grab your reader's attention first and then lead your readers directly to the main point of your essay. Consider any of these seven methods.

1. Start with an incident, real, or invented, that leads the reader gracefully to the point of your essay.
2. State a provocative idea in an ordinary way or an ordinary idea in a provocative way.
3. Use a quotation (not necessarily a famous one). Make sure it relates to the topic of your essay.
4. Knock down a commonly held assumption or define a word in a new and surprising way.
5. Ask an interesting question or two, which you will answer in your essay.
6. Tell a story. A narrative is a good way to begin your essay because it creates suspense.
7. Make a reference to a familiar or special occasion.

Great Endings

You will want to make sure your conclusion makes a positive impression. With a good ending, you can summarize your essay, tie in new ideas, and provide a lasting impact that people won't forget. Three of the most effective ways to consolidate your ideas and provide a note of finality are:

1. Summary
2. A summary plus look into the future
3. A further implication of the essay idea

RULES TO WRITING A GREAT COLLEGE ESSAY

1. **Answer the Question.** You can follow these next 13 steps, but if you miss the question, you will not be admitted to any institution.
2. **Be Original.** Even seemingly boring topics can sound interesting if creatively approached.
3. **Be Yourself.** Admissions officers want to learn about you and your writing ability. Write about something meaningful and describe your feelings, not necessarily your actions.
4. **Avoid re-writing your accomplishments.** You have already given them that information in your application (or perhaps in a short answer).
5. **Don't "Treasurize" your Composition.** Big words are fine, but only if they are used in the appropriate contexts with complex styles.
6. **Use Imagery and Clear, Vivid Prose.** Appeal to the five senses of the admissions officers.
7. **Use mature professional writing skills.** Avoid contractions, slang, and "you."
8. **Spend the Most Time on your Introduction.** Expect admissions officers to spend 1-2 minutes reading your essay. Use your introduction to grab their interest.
 - ➡ **Don't Summarize in your Introduction.** Ask yourself why a reader would want to read your entire essay after reading your introduction. If you summarize, the admissions officer need not read the rest of your essay.
 - ➡ **Create Mystery or Intrigue in your Introduction.** Raise questions in the minds of the admissions officers to force them to read on. Appeal to their emotions to make them relate to your subject matter.

- 9. Body Paragraphs Must Relate to Introduction.** Your introduction can be original, but cannot be silly. The paragraphs that follow must relate to your introduction.
- 10. Use Transition.** Transition includes repeating key words and progression of the idea. Transition provides the intellectual architecture to argument building.
- 11. Prove It.** Develop your main idea with vivid and specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reason. There is a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details. Your essay must remain plausible and provable.
- 12. Conclusions are Crucial.** The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. The reader should not need to be reminded of what you wrote 300 words before. Consider the following conclusions:
- ➡ Expand upon the broader implications of your discussion.
 - ➡ Consider linking your conclusion to your introduction to establish a sense of balance by reiterating introductory phrases.
 - ➡ Redefine a term used previously in your body paragraphs.
 - ➡ End with a famous quote that is relevant to your argument. Do not forcefully try to do this, as this approach is overdone. This should come naturally.
 - ➡ Frame your discussion within a larger context or show that your topic has widespread appeal.
 - ➡ Make sure that you express indirectly your values or virtues as the underlying theme to the topic.
 - ➡ Remember, your essay need not be so tidy that you can answer why your little sister died or why people starve in Africa; you are not writing a “sit-com,” but should forge some attempt at closure.
- 13. Do Something Else.** Spend a week or so away from your draft to decide if you still consider your topic and approach worthwhile.
- 14. Give your Draft to Others.** Ask editors to read with these questions in mind:

- ➡ What is the essay about?
- ➡ Have I used active voice verbs wherever possible?
- ➡ Is my sentence structure varied or do I use all long or all short sentences?
- ➡ Do you detect any clichés?
- ➡ Do I use transition appropriately?
- ➡ Do I use imagery often and does this make the essay clearer and more vivid?
- ➡ What about this essay is memorable?
- ➡ What's the worst part of the essay?
- ➡ What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
- ➡ What parts of the essay do not support your main argument or are immaterial to your case?
- ➡ Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This **MUST** be the case.
- ➡ What does the essay reveal about your personality?
- ➡ Could anyone else have written this essay?
- ➡ How would you fill in the following blank on the essay: "I want to accept you to this college because our college needs more _____."

15. Revise, Revise, Revise. You only are allowed so many words; use them wisely. Do you use transition? Are your introduction and conclusions more than summaries? Did you find every single grammatical error?

- ➡ Allow for the evolution on your main topic. Do not assume your subject must remain fixed and that you can only tweak sentences.
- ➡ Editing takes time. Consider reordering your supporting details, delete irrelevant sections, and make clear the broader implications of your experiences. Allow your more important arguments to come to the foreground. Take points that might only be implicit and make them implicit.

College Essay Prompts

ApplyTexas Essay Prompts A, B and C

For U.S. Freshman and International Freshman Applications

Slated to replace current ApplyTexas essay choices A, B and C (650-750 words)

For inclusion in ApplyTexas applications for the 2020-2021 cycle

(Summer 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021 - opening 7/1/2019)

Essay A:

Tell us your story. What unique opportunities or challenges have you experienced throughout your high school career that have shaped who you are today?

Essay B:

Most students have an identity, an interest, or a talent that defines them in an essential way. Tell us about yourself.

Essay C:

You've got a ticket in your hand – Where will you go? What will you do? What will happen when you get there?

University of Texas at Austin

Short Answer Prompts 250-300 words

Short Answer Prompts

Required Short Answer 1:

Why are you interested in the major you indicated as your first-choice major?

Required Short Answer 2:

Leadership can be demonstrated in many ways. Please share how you have demonstrated leadership in either your school, job, community, and/or within your family responsibilities.

Required Short Answer 3:

Please share how you believe your experiences, perspectives, and/or talents have shaped your ability to contribute to and enrich the learning environment at UT Austin, both in and out of the classroom.

Optional Short Answer:

Please share background on events or special circumstances that may have impacted your high school academic performance.

Common Application 2020-2021

If you are thinking about attending an **out-of-state college**, here are the essay prompts for the Common Application, which is commonly used by many universities outside of Texas, except for

some private schools. These essays should be no longer than 650 words, and no shorter than 250 words. Here are the new prompts for the Common Application:

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. 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.
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. Additional Information: Please provide an answer below if you wish to provide details of circumstances or qualifications not reflected in the application. You may enter up to 650 words.

Coalition Application (recommended length 500-550 words)

The prompts for the 2017-19 application year are:

1. Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.
2. Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution.
3. Has there been a time when you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs?
4. What is the hardest part of being a teenager now? What's the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (assuming they would listen to you)?
5. Submit an essay on a topic of your choice.

University of California Application

<https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-freshman/personal-insight-questions.html>

You will have 8 questions to choose from. You must respond to only 4 of the 8 questions. Each response is limited to a maximum of 350 words.

Which questions you choose to answer is entirely up to you: But you should select questions that are most relevant to your experience and that best reflect your individual circumstances. (Please read essay guide at the above link.)

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. Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.
7. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?
8. Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?