

Topics For Getting Unstuck

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Choose one of the following prompts and write an essay in response. Feel free to take the essay in any direction you choose.

- 1) Many people have a beloved t-shirt, a favorite sweater, or a well-worn pair of shoes. Write an essay in which you reflect on a favorite article of clothing, your experiences with it, and how it represents a part of you. For example, one student wrote about all the shoes in her closet, and how each pair represented a different facet of her personality.
- 2) Describe your relationship with a pet. Which of its personality traits are your favorites? What traits in your personality does the pet bring out? Describe an irrational or comical situation you have found yourself in with your pet. Imagine what goes through the pet's mind. How do you explain your bond with your pet? What does the relationship say about you?
- 3) Describe a process related to an activity, hobby, or interest that you have repeated many times. Possibilities are endless and include hitting a baseball, warming up for a concert, putting on make-up, and preparing for a lab. What are the skills necessary? Why is the process significant or meaningful to you?
- 4) Think of a family tradition or activity that has been meaningful in your life. Possibilities include an annual trip to a favorite vacation destination, family dinners, a holiday gathering with extended family, or some other often-repeated activity. Describe the dynamics of the activity and the interaction of the personalities. How might an outsider see this occasion? Are there funny or quirky tales to be told?
- 5) Describe a place that is part of your daily life. It might be your walk or ride to school, your neighborhood, an athletic field, or the grounds of your school. Talk about particular areas within the place and their significance. Describe the people and their turf. Sketch the personalities you see. How have the people and the place helped shape you?
- 6) Think of a view you hold that is not typically shared by people your age, or that differs from the view(s) of your friends or family. It may be as silly as not liking peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, or as serious as not believing in the death penalty. Is there an anecdote that illustrates why you hold the belief that you do? Any reasons why you are uncomfortable or have mixed feelings about holding this view? Explain.

- 7) Identify your favorite academic subject, independent of any teachers you may like or dislike. Explain why you like the subject based on what you “do” when studying it. What have you learned about yourself – skills/abilities, likes/dislikes, your place in the universe – from studying the subject?
- 8) Think of all your favorite hang-out places in the world – in school, your neighborhood, your yard and house, vacation spots, relatives’ homes, etc. Choose one and describe why it has such good vibes. Any stories come to mind? How does the place make you feel? What does it make you think about? Have your feelings/perceptions evolved as you have gotten older?

College Essay Do’s and Don’ts
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WHAT TO DO

- 1) Be Likable, Not Impressive. Too many essay writers sound like the people who introduce themselves by quoting their SAT scores. Your activity list is the place to brag. The essay is the place to be genuine.
- 2) The Best Essays Are About Nothing. That is, they are about nothing but you. Recounting a big experience – like how you dove and caught the ball in the bottom of the ninth inning -- shrinks the space available to show what makes you unique.
- 3) Think Metaphorically. If your life seems mundane, make an analogy to bigger things. Is your school career like the travels of Odysseus? Is Facebook a metaphor for your generation? Maybe not, but think about how small things in your life could represent larger things.
- 4) Circle Your Verbs. Are they concrete and specific? Do they sparkle? Impressive adjectives make for a static essay. Verbs pack punch.
- 5) Wrestle With Uncertainty. The most interesting issues are often the ones with which you are still grappling, and for which you have no easy answer.

WHAT TO AVOID

- 1) A Life-Changing Experience. Did you learn a valuable lesson from losing the big game? Have you been a different person ever since? Probably not – so don't try to convince others that you are.
- 2) Making Everything Peachy Keen. Avoid telling how you encountered a problem, found a solution, and lived happily ever after. It sounds fake and self-serving.
- 3) Social Problem of the Year Bandwagon. Last year, it was the Virginia Tech massacre. This year, it could be global warming. It is generally better to focus on your own problems than those of the world.
- 4) Melodrama. Straining for the dramatic always ends badly. Your life is important to you, and it can be interesting to others, but it is easy to sound self-important when describing your experiences.
- 5) The Person Whom You Admire. If you write about such a person, make sure the essay is about you and not about him or her.

Fiske Real College Essays That Work Editing Checklist

- _____ Couldn't have been written by anyone else
- _____ Gets into real stuff – how the author thinks and feels
- _____ Has a unifying idea or theme
- _____ Tells a story and/or includes concrete anecdotes
- _____ Is written in a voice that sounds like the author
- _____ Has a well-crafted opening line or paragraph
- _____ Has active, specific verbs

- _____ Avoids awkward repetition of words or phrasing
- _____ Uses varied sentence structure (simple, compound, complex)
- _____ Uses “I” where appropriate
- _____ Avoids cynicism, negativity, and self-congratulation
- _____ Doesn’t take itself too seriously

What We Mean By “Show, Don’t Tell”
Or, Why Anecdotes (Nouns and Verbs) Are Better Than Adjectives

An adjective is an abstract category. If you say that your friend is “crazy,” “zany,” or even “off-the-wall,” you haven’t said much. But if you describe the time she got out of her car and locked it with the keys still in the ignition, you’re beginning to make progress. Or the time she got the hiccups during an assembly, couldn’t stop laughing, and had to run out the back of the auditorium. If you tell about the basketball game when she grabbed a rebound, raced to the wrong basket, and sank a shot, then froze in her tracks and exclaimed “Oh s _ _ _” loud enough for everyone to hear.... Now we get the idea.