

Personal Statement
College Essay Writing
Packet



Name _____

2025-26 Common App/SUNY App Prompts

Before beginning your essay, ensure that the school(s) you are considering accept 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. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
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 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.

Some questions to ask yourself before you begin drafting:

- ☐ How do I choose a topic that helps me stand out?
 - ☐ Most likely, every time you've had someone talk about the "topic" of your essay, that person was referring to the thing you were actually going to focus on and write about.
 - ☐ For example, if the topic of your essay for some class was the symbolism of the green light in *The Great Gatsby* or the primary causes of the American Civil War, you would focus on examples, details, and analysis exploring those things.
 - ☐ For this kind of writing, your topic is YOU. Most of you will find it very difficult to write about yourself.
 - ☐ But with a college application essay, your topic should be you—who you are, what you value, what insights, interests, qualities, and skills you'll bring to a college campus and community.

- ☐ What experiences, interests, and qualities should I include in my essay?
 - ☐ You do not need some monumental event to have happened to you to write a great college essay! Avoid “trauma dumping” on the admissions reader.
 - ☐ This should be an insight into what makes you great and unique. I always phrase it in one-on-one conferences as: Why should you be given preference over other applicants applying to this university?
- ☐ Are any personal statement topics off limits?
 - ☐ **Avoid cliché topics:** This is not a job resume! A resume does not give the reader a true sense of who you are/Missions trips/sporting event loss or win/a big performance/your personal hero/the bad grade you received/your first heartbreak/illegal or unethical activities.
- ☐ How do I structure my personal statement to make it engaging?
 - ☐ Have a great hook. Admissions readers see thousands of essays. Do not bore them to tears!
 - ☐ Use an anecdote (a brief, engaging, personal story that is used to illustrate a point).
 - ☐ Establish a “thread” or image that ties it all together.
 - ☐ Show, don’t tell! You should have tons of imagery in your opening.
- ☐ How do I show my achievements without feeling like I am bragging?
 - ☐ You should be proud of your achievements; however, no one likes a braggart. A bit of humility goes a long way.
- ☐ How do I know when I have a “perfected” final draft?
 - ☐ That is up to you. A few recommendations, though: ask several people to read your drafts/final version, but not too many. Too many readers tend to confuse things for the writer.
 - ☐ Ultimately, this is YOUR essay, not mine, not your parents, not your siblings or friends. When you are happy with it, you are done.
- ☐ **Side note on AI usage:** Why you should not use AI on your personal statement essay--here is a quote from the Cornell admissions office: “Ethical uses of generative AI include researching colleges, brainstorming essay topics, and reviewing the grammar and spelling of your completed essays. Unethical uses include (but are not limited to) using generative AI to outline, draft, or write your essays.”
- ☐ Caltech also has clear language on its admissions website about ethical uses of AI; I especially like this advice: “If you are still wondering whether your use of AI in crafting your application is ethical, ask yourself whether it would be ethical to have a trusted adult perform the same task you are asking of ChatGPT. Would a teacher be able to review your essay for grammatical and spelling errors? Of course! Would that same teacher write a draft of an essay for you to tweak and then submit? Definitely not.”

What Makes a College Application Essay “Great”?

Now that all of that is out of the way, how do you begin to plan?

If so, you need to know what makes a great essay to know how to start brainstorming and writing your own. You can often recognize a “great one” when you read or hear it—but it’s more difficult to explain what exactly made it that way.

Unlike other essays, these have a very specific goal that you must always factor in when you write a great one: To help your college application land in the “Yes!” pile.

Many of the elements of an effective college admissions essay further that goal.

A great college application essay:

1. “Grabs” the readers at the start. I believe one of the best ways to do this is to start with an anecdote (real-life incident).
2. Usually is written in a narrative (story-telling/memoir-like/slice-of-life) style, drawing off real-life experiences.
3. Reveals a specific core or “defining” quality (creative, resourceful, fierce, resilient, driven, etc.) about the writer, rather than trying to describe many qualities. This is how to focus the essay.
4. Showcases what the writer cares about and values; shows character. (Again, it shouldn’t try to cover everything the writer values, but focuses on a main point or two.)
5. Take a risk. This means the writer tries to find a topic that is unique (includes The Unexpected or A Twist) and relates the story creatively. Narrative-style writing is creative.
6. Shows grit. If a writer shares “a time” she or he faced some type of problem (challenge, obstacle, change, mistake, etc.), the essay naturally will highlight the writer's raw determination (eg, grit). This is a highly prized quality by most colleges.
7. Reflects the writer’s individual voice or personality. The trick is to write these essays in a more casual style.
8. Includes a “memorable” topic. Make it interesting, of course, but do not stretch to find a topic to impress the reader.
9. Illustrates the writer’s ability (and passion) to think, reason, analyze, question, and learn independently. This is what higher education is all about.

10. Connects with the reader. Sharing stories is the best way to relate with the reader, since they will want to know what happened, how you felt (the good and bad), what you did about it, and how it changed you. Chances are, the reader has experienced something similar and will “get” you.

11. Makes you come across as likable. This doesn’t mean you have to only show your best side in the essay. Actually, writers who open themselves up in their essay, share their fears and flaws, end up the most appealing. Who likes someone with zero humility?

12. Shows your command of the English language. Of course, make sure your essay is as free of errors as possible. You should write several “rough” drafts, but then go back and clean them up. Proofread like mad.

There are most likely dozens more of these elements that make good essays great. In order to get a sense of what makes a great essay, we will read and analyze some samples. If one pops off the page and you really like it, take a minute to think about why it appealed to you. Use those same features in your essay!

Here are some varied essay topic examples from past years:

- Living with divorced parents (could this be cliché? Yes, be careful with these topics)
- Having three older sisters
- Discrimination based upon race, gender, and socio-economic status
- Being a big guy in a small person’s world
- Ice skating
- Activism
- Excessive reading/being a bibliophile
- Being the child of two mental health professionals
- Ice cream making
- An obsession with movies
- Everyone is shorter/taller than you
- Family addiction
- Car accidents
- The loss of a loved one

College Essay “Scavenger” Hunt

We will read three college essay examples together and share our thoughts (the good and the bad). Please be on the lookout for the following things:

Content: Consider the topic (its appropriateness and interest for the assignment as well as a clear focus suitable to essay length) and the way the topic is developed (clarity, sufficiency of its argument, its scope, subcategories, amount and type of examples, anecdotes, evidence, etc.).

Organization: Consider how the essay is introduced and concluded (especially looking for a “frame” to the essay, where the intro and conclusion refer to the same idea), whether the thesis is located in the most helpful place (direct or implied), how the essay is structured, whether the order or extent of development is successful, as well as how individual paragraphs are organized (clear topic sentences, appropriate and concrete evidence, logical organization of evidence).

Style: Style can refer to the overall style of an essay: whether the tone is appropriate (humorous, serious, reflective, satirical, etc.), whether they use sufficient and appropriate variety (factual, analytical, evaluative, reflective), and whether they use sufficient creativity. Style can also refer to the style of individual sentences: whether you use a variety of sentence styles and lengths, whether sentences are worded clearly, and whether word choice is interesting and appropriate.

Correctness: Correctness refers to grammar, punctuation, and form of the essay. You do not need to know the exact grammatical term or rule to know when a sentence is not correct. A sloppy college essay does not look good for anyone involved- you first and foremost, but also your teachers, parents, tutors, etc. This is most likely one of the most important pieces that you will write throughout high school, so show that in your writing by producing an error-free paper.

College Essay #1-

Duncan Lynd
Laguna Beach, CA
California State University, Long Beach, CA
Word Count: 600

A Small World

While grabbing lunch between games at a water polo tournament, I noticed one of my new teammates rarely looked me in the eye. Instead of taking the empty seat next to me, he opted to sit across the table. Even when I tried to start a conversation with him, he only looked down and mumbled, “Oh, hey,” and walked away.

This type of cold-shoulder treatment wasn’t new to me. I’m a big guy. In bare feet, I’m about 6 feet 7 inches tall, and I’m pushing 300 pounds. Yes, it can be a pain. I bump my head going through doorways, I don’t fit in most mid-size cars, and I can barely squeeze into most classroom desks. But I understand that the world is made for average-sized people, and I like to think I’m above average. One thing, however, is hard for me to take: People who don’t know me assume I’m mean.

Like my frosty water polo teammate. I understand why he was intimidated by me, especially since he was one of the smaller players. I would have felt the same way. When I meet people for the first time, I often draw conclusions or make assumptions. Almost all my life, I’ve had to deal with the expectations and judgments people make about me

just because I'm often the largest kid in the room. Ever since I was a kid, there has been pressure for me to perform athletically because of my size and strength.

When I went to the grocery store, random people consistently asked me if I played football. When I told them, "No," the men always lectured me not only about why I should play football, but what I should be doing with my life, with my body, and with my potential. I normally just nodded and smiled, but it bothered me that they thought they knew what was best for me.

Not only did I never play football, but I also defied many of the assumptions people made about me. How many people my size love nothing more than mixing up a chocolate batter and decorating a three-layer cake? Besides my passion for baking, I also love working with little kids. For the last two summers, I volunteered at a camp where I taught kids how to surf. My nickname was Teddy Bear. And if I wanted to make my friends fall on the ground laughing, I reminded them of my dream to learn to play the violin.

In general, I ignore what people say to me or think about me when it comes to my size. Instead of reacting, I usually just smile at them. On many levels, there are advantages to towering over most of the world. I always get the front seat since I don't fit in the back. No one even dares call it a "shotgun." I usually have the best seat in the house, whether it's a rock concert or a ball game, no matter where I sit. And if people are getting rowdy and making my friends uncomfortable, all I need to do is step in the middle and simply ask, "What's going on?" and they disperse.

Even the people who are intimidated at first by me eventually come around once they get to know me. Like the water polo player at the restaurant. Within about two weeks, we finally had a conversation and ended up finding we had a lot in common. In fact, he ended up as my best friend. For me, it is a small world after all, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

ANALYSIS: How can you not like this guy after reading his essay? It was obvious to him that his impressive stature could make a nifty essay topic. On some level, it had to define him. While not being read as predictable or cliché.

Many students have traits or idiosyncrasies that feel unique to them, but the truth is, many other students share them, such as being a big guy, being super tall, having too many freckles, being clumsy, being afraid of heights, etc. They can all make terrific topics, but you have to work a little harder to give them a twist or something unexpected.

You don't only want to share your stories, but also how they make you feel, what you think, and learn from them. Then you will have a knock-out essay.

College Essay #2-

Gabrielle Mark Bachoua

San Diego, CA

University of California, Davis, CA

Word count: 483

Leaping Dancer

As my mom backs out of our driveway, I glance at the back seats to make sure my basketball gear is there, along with my school books, phone charger, and beat-up copy of *Catch-22*. We slowly wind through my neighborhood and over about a half dozen speed bumps, then pull onto the highway heading south with the other Sunday traffic.

I sit back and watch the familiar landmarks—the large Denny’s sign with the missing “N,” the short stretch of undeveloped land, the Shell billboard that meant we were almost there—flash past my window.

I’ve made this 20-mile trip between my parents’ homes four times a week for the last decade, four times a week, ever since they divorced when I was seven. I must have taken it more than a thousand times. Sometimes I dreaded getting into that car, and resented my parents for putting my older sister and me through the circular logic that moving us back and forth would make our lives normal, because we see each parent often, but moving back and forth isn’t normal, unless they make it normal, which isn’t normal. Now I know it makes sense because normal isn’t ideal, normal is the unexpected and the crazy and the unforgiving.

I now realize that those rides were the consistency amid the madness. Looking out the window and down to the lane reflectors I think...about how on Friday’s basketball game my jump shot was off because I was floating to the left, about how I’m excited to see my dog and cat, about how upset I am because of Yossarian’s predicament, about how I’ll miss my dad, about how veterinary medicine is fascinating, about how I needed to study for my chemistry test, about how I will work harder to get into my dream school, and about how I’m glad that I get to take a nice nap before I go to mom’s.

I even remember the first time years ago when I noticed the smudge on the rear driver’s side window, which was shaped into a leaping dancer—a dancer in white. I would watch her move through the trees in El Cajon Valley, bob my head up and down to help her jump over hillside terraces of Spring Valley, and keep her from crashing into the Westfield mall sign two miles from my mom’s home.

It was those hours I spent thinking silently to myself when I learned more about who I am, where I envision myself going, and what my role is in this world. Sitting in the front seat, I’d take a moment to look back to see that same dancer in white, however faceless, nameless, and abstract, gave me a sense of comfort. That even though I wasn’t really ‘home,’ I still was, because home isn’t simply where you rest your head, but also where you have the security to dream inside of it.

ANALYSIS: Once again, an essay like this proves that you can pick almost anything to write about as long as you give it a focus. In this case, Gabrielle picked a simple stretch of roadway between her parents' homes. She described the weekly routine and drive with vivid, descriptive details, so you felt as though you were in the car staring out the same window.

But she used the trip as a metaphor for a meaningful time in her life, when she had lots of downtime to reflect on her life, her feelings, and her dreams. Even though it shares the pain of her parents' divorce in an understated way, that's always in the background—and we can tell it has shaped her.

If she had never had the time to daydream and reflect on her day, who knows how she would have been different somehow, or those emotions would have played out somewhere else.

Nothing really happens in this essay, but it still manages to have momentum and hold our interest. I love how she personifies a little smudge on the window into a dancer, another metaphor for her own journey.

In the end, Gabrielle explored the idea of home, and defined it more as a journey than a destination—whether riding in a car for a commute between houses or a lifelong adventure.

I believe Gabrielle didn't set out to write a "deep" essay filled with metaphors and heavy insights, but by describing a simple routine and then reflecting upon what it meant to her, she revealed herself as an observant, reflective, and wise young woman.

College Essay #3-

Luc Stevens
Laguna Beach, CA
University of Oregon, Eugene, OR
Word count: 544

Skating Through Hard Times

I was in fifth grade, eating breakfast with my family, when the floor of my home gave way under our feet. We barely escaped from the house before it buckled into two pieces, and ran to safety before the entire hillside gave way. Our home was destroyed, and we narrowly escaped with our lives.

Six years ago, my family was caught in this terrifying landslide when my house and a dozen others slid down the side of a canyon in Laguna Beach. Within less than 10 minutes, my life literally fell out from under me. For the next five years, my family moved over a dozen times, often living out of boxes with friends and relatives. Besides my clothes and basic necessities, the only thing I hauled from house to house was my collection of skateboards.

Six months after the landslide, the city of Laguna Beach relocated us to a recycled trailer on a parking lot at the end of town so my parents could save money to rebuild our home. I see it now as an extremely generous gesture, but at the time it was difficult. Living in this dilapidated, thin-walled trailer was definitely not the life I had envisioned. My backyard was an enormous parking lot.

As a lifelong skateboarder, however, that flat expanse of asphalt helped me get through the hardest years of my life. You see, I'm a skater from a hillside neighborhood and had never experienced such space and opportunity. I took advantage of the situation and made this neglected, dirty parking lot into a skateboarding oasis with ramps and rails that my friends donated.

We would all gather together after school as a release from the pressures of life for a while, practicing trick after trick, working to fine-tune each maneuver. Contests were created, videos shot, and movies made.

For the first time in my life, I had a flat area where my friends and I could hang out. Even though we didn't talk much about the landslide, these friendships were both a distraction and softened the unpleasant living situation.

Also, balancing sports and loads of homework, I turned to what I thought of as my new backyard skatepark at night to escape from reality each day. The sense of riding back and forth on a cold night helped me relax and persevere through my studies and life in general.

Numerous years passed in that cramped, rickety, old trailer, and life wore on, dealing with everything from highway noise reverberating right outside our door to the constant rodent problem. When my family's new, hillside home finally came to completion at Christmas last year, I was more than ready to move.

The only thing I would miss from my five-year ordeal was my beloved "skate park." After moving into our permanent home, the crazy life I endured since fifth grade was now over, and even though I could not bring the skate ramps themselves, I was able to bring plenty of memories.

One of the most important lessons I learned through all this is that I can find positive opportunities even in the grimmest circumstances. If I could find friendship, support, and fun in a parking lot, I know I can find the upside to almost any situation.

ANALYSIS: Luc almost had no choice but to write about how he and his family lost their home in a landslide when he was young. It was such a defining experience—not just the terrifying event, but the long, slow process of “going home.”

I like how Luc recounted briefly the actual slide, and how he didn't over-dramatize or dwell on that. Instead, he picked right up on how he turned a bad situation into something positive. Like any good personal essay, this one has a clear universal truth: How every cloud has a silver lining (if you find it.)

Because Luc's description of his experience showed us how bad things were and then the steps he took to improve them, he never had to spend a lot of time explaining what he learned. He only needed a couple of sentences at the very end to share his lesson

How to Start Your College Application Essay

If you are writing a college admissions essay that responds to a prompt that asks you to tell about yourself, or about "a time," or describe a quality, background, interest, identity, talent, characteristic, experience, or accomplishment (such as The Common App prompts or SUNY App prompts), then your essay is also known as a personal statement.

The most effective personal statements are written as narrative essays, meaning they relate an experience using a storytelling style.

To share an incident or moment from your past, you only need two components to make a story: a character and a conflict.

So one magic way to create a personal narrative is to search your recent past for a conflict. (You are the "character.")

Thinking back to your previous English classes, remember that conflicts can come from many different places—from within yourself (internal: you have a personal issue or hang-up that caused you pain or trouble) to outside yourself (external: something happened to you).

- To put it simply, conflict is a problem.
- Problems come in all shapes and sizes.
- They do not need to be traumas or crises, although those can work, too.

Here are other words for a conflict or problem: challenge, failure, obstacle, mistake, hang-up, issue, a change, dilemma, fears, obsessions, etc.

Examples of conflicts or problems: you are shy, competitive, stubborn, were bullied, got injured, have big feet, frizzy red hair, smile too much, someone quit at your work, don't have your own car, can't spell, don't eat meat, a perfectionist, a procrastinator, have a mean grandparent, no money, etc...

Once you determine your topic, follow these steps:

1. Describe *the time* you had a problem or describe a strong example of your problem.

(Include what happened and how it made you feel. Try to start at the moment it hit, or happened, for the best impact. Include the 5Ws—who, what, when, where, and why.

2. Background of the history of this problem (when did it start, why/how did it happen or get this way.) “It all started back when...”
3. Talk about how you dealt with that problem. What did you do about it? Steps you took to handle it.
4. Reflect on that problem. What did you think about it? How did you feel? Did handling it change you in any way, or how you think about things? Share your thoughts.
5. What did you *learn* from dealing with that problem—about yourself, others, or *life in general*? Can anything good come out of it? Did you develop or demonstrate a core quality—determination, problem-solving, creativity, passion, patience, respect—in the process? Talk about that.
6. Conclusion: (Look back at what you learned and see what personal qualities or characteristics you used or developed while dealing with this problem—aha, there’s the answer to your prompt).

In your conclusion, discuss how you would/could use these qualities or characteristics, or what you learned, in your future endeavors. Chances are, you have the beginning of a personal narrative. You told a story about yourself where you encountered a problem, and it affected you in some way, which you then explained, analyzed and shared with the reader. Yes, this is a formula—but it is as old as time. It’s called telling a story!

The best thing about this style of writing is that it is also naturally very compelling to read.

Writing Anecdotes: A Crash Course

I love anecdotes.

Especially for starting narrative essays for college application essays.

They can take a little practice to compose, but what a deceptively powerful writing tool.

Actually, if you start almost any type of writing with an anecdote—from a college essay to a book report to a press release—your message will instantly rise and shine above other written messages competing for readers’ attention.

They are engaging, accessible, and they have a wow factor. Even though you don’t mean to be impressive, people often think you are *so creative* and accomplished when you wield them.

I just think readers are grateful for writing that includes little real-life stories. It’s simple: You want to read them. Who doesn’t want to know what happened next?

Crash Course in How to Write an Anecdote

Here's a handy list about writing interesting anecdotes. Read them all and you should be an expert in no time:

Components of an Anecdote: A good anecdote usually includes scene setting, so the reader can immediately start to visualize *where* something is happening. And something is happening—like a problem or action.

It will also include details that help the reader step into the moment—hearing, seeing, smelling, and feeling what was going on.

The best anecdotes help readers experience the moment or incident by including bits of dialogue so they can get into the writer's head and feel their pain, joy, or other thoughts and emotions.

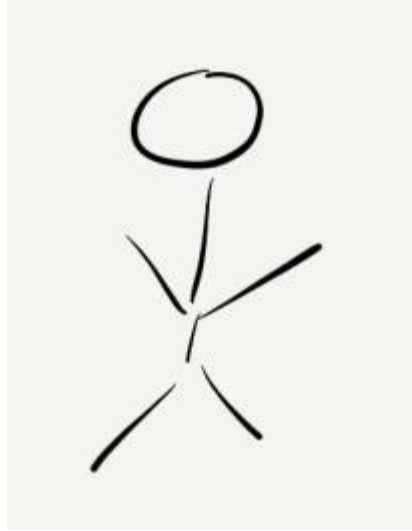
TIP: To start an anecdote for your narrative essay, begin by letting the reader know **WHERE** you were (just enough so they get the idea), and then put yourself in the scene.

Then go from there. Example: Sitting **at the bus stop**, I stepped off the curb...or: Just before midnight, we gathered in a large circle **in front of the fire**...or: Driving with my friends **along the Coast Highway**, we stopped **at a gas station**...While scraping the burnt onions off the grill, I could tell my shift **at the White Castle** was almost over...

Want to write a killer college application essay? Start with an anecdote. You will leave the majority of other essay writers in your college application dust.

A Mini-Lesson on Storytelling

I found this brilliant little example of how to understand what makes up a good story today in a column written by the talented sportswriter and journalist Tommy Tomlinson. If you are writing your college application essay and want to use the narrative style to tell a “slice of life” story or use an anecdote, this mini-lesson can help you a lot. Tomlinson wrote: “First, I'm going to draw three objects.



This is a sympathetic character. It's probably someone you like, but at the very least, it's someone you're emotionally invested in. You care what happens to this person. (In your college application essays, this person is almost always you—unless you are writing your essay about someone else.)



This is a hurdle. It's an obstacle of some kind — could be a bad guy, could be a physical challenge, could be some sort of internal emotional demon.



And **this is the pot of gold** — some kind of goal, some kind of reward, physical or emotional or whatever. (It can be as simple as dealing with your problem.)

A **story** is the journey of this character you care about (yourself), confronting and dealing with this obstacle, to reach this pot of gold. In addition to these three pictures, you need to answer two questions:

1. What's the story about?

That is determined by you!

2. What's it REALLY about?

Here's what I mean. What the story's about is literally what happens in the narrative — who this character is, what goal he or she is trying to reach, what obstacle is in the way. The unique set of facts. What the story's REALLY about is a way of saying, what's the point? What's the universal meaning that someone should draw from this story? What's the lesson? (What did you learn in the process of dealing with your problem?)

Think about the first *Rocky* movie. What's it about? It's about a no-name boxer in Philly (sympathetic character) who gets a chance to fight the champ (obstacle) and goes the distance (pot of gold). He doesn't win the fight — they saved that for *Rocky II*. The goal isn't always the ultimate prize. Sometimes the goal is completing the journey. Proving you can go the distance is a worthy goal in itself.

But what's the movie REALLY about? In a larger sense, the obstacle is not Apollo Creed. **The obstacle is Rocky's own self-doubt.** The goal is making something of himself, not just out of pride but so he can prove himself to Paulie and feel worthy of Adrian's love.

Why is that second layer of meaning important? Because not everybody is a professional boxer. But all of us have doubted ourselves and had other people doubt us. All of us have had the universal feeling of knowing that going the distance is a victory in itself.

That's what makes stories matter: when you read or watch or hear a story about a total stranger, in a completely different world, and you recognize that story as your own. Stories connect us as human beings. In fact, they're part of what MAKES us human beings."

Formulating ideas

Once you have established your "problem," you will jot down notes in list form by answering the following questions:

- a. How did that problem make you feel?
- b. How did you handle that problem? What steps did you take to solve the problem? Where did you draw inspiration to face it?
- c. What did you learn in the process of dealing with it? About yourself. About others. About the world in general.
- d. Did this experience change you, or how you think about things/life, in any way? Get reflective and analytical at this point.

These notes will help you when writing your college essay. Use your anecdote to explore how you deal with life, which will ultimately reveal what kind of a person you are, how you think, and what you care about, etc. When students say what they think or feel without overthinking a point, it usually comes out in a way that captures their personality. When answering questions, they are more likely to use common language that reflects their individuality than those clunky SAT words that sound awkward and dull.

Mapping out a simple writing plan

Narrative essays are written in a more casual style and not the 5-paragraph format. You will have a word limit placed on your writing (650 max for Common or SUNY Apps). You may find it difficult to "cut" your piece down while still staying true to the story that you want to tell.

When you begin work on your rough draft:

- Start with the anecdote to SHOW the problem and then background the incident (a couple of paragraphs);
- TELL about what it meant (explain, reflect, analyze, etc.—drawing off notes from Day Five) in a couple more paragraphs.

If you stick to this order in general, you should end up with an interesting piece of writing that is compelling and reveals your core quality.

It's always great to read these out loud, and have others listen and note the "golden lines," or parts they like, and pay attention to times the essay gets dull (time to cut it).

I encourage you to write as long as you want for your draft, but then cut your essay to a word count (Again, 650 words is the limit for the Common or SUNY App.) There's no better self-editing exercise than shortening a writing piece.

Brainstorming/Outlining

Essay Prompt:

What are three adjectives that best describe you?

#1	#2	#3
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Three examples from your life that connect to the prompt:



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Keep these things in mind to narrow down your choice from the above:

- What message do you want to come across to the admissions counselor?

- What does this example show about you?
- What/do you have enough details to include about this example?
- What is the main theme you want to get across to the reader?
- How does each paragraph of your essay support the message you want to send?

Additional Questions to ponder:

- What are your core or defining qualities?
- What types of X things have you done recently?
- What are some of your interests or hobbies?
- What do you think you will study in college?
- What kind of thinker or learner are you?

Drafting Tips

Remember this is a draft! Keep a few things in mind as you write this out:

1. Focus on yourself— this is a personal statement, so make sure that even if you talk about how other people have impacted you, you bring the essay back to yourself
2. Show don't tell— be descriptive about your experiences, and add concrete details to make your stories stronger, and think of the 5 senses while writing.
3. Positive v. Negative— If you're talking about an experience that was negative, remember to come back to some positive ways that it impacted who you are as a person, and how you grew.