

Think Like a Writer

from Wow's Partners Training for Counselors and Consultants

Prompt (Common App personal statement)

The college application essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. **What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question** and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response.

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 failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
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 or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Think Like a Writer

Complete Steps 1-3 on the following pages. We encourage you to share these exercises with your students and colleagues. Keep in mind that you are juggling three things at once: characteristics (what you want readers to know), prompts and topics.

- Use the worksheets that follow to explore topic ideas.
- If you have limited time with students, consider spending time on these activities instead of or in addition to reviewing completed essays. When students start out right, they tend to feel more confident. They also write fewer, more focused drafts.
- Share this activity with English teachers to help them understand the context and audience for the essays their students write.

Step 1: Understand the Prompt

from Wow Online – College Essay

Which prompt are you responding to?

In general terms, what is the prompt trying to find out about you?

If you are writing a Common Application essay, think about the Common App in general (not the 5 essay choices specifically.) What is the purpose of a Common App essay? If you are writing a different essay, read the prompt carefully. In your own words, what is it trying to find out?

What do readers already know?

Before you decide on an essay topic, think about what readers already know about you. Remember that an application contains a great deal of information. In the space below, make a list of some of the things readers can find out about you from the rest of your application (e.g., I play drums; I babysit; I have a 3.7; I got 24 on my ACT; I volunteered at a soup kitchen last summer.)

What do I want readers to know?

Now think about what you want readers to know about you that they can't find out from the rest of your application. In the space below, list some of your best characteristics (e.g., I am confident; I don't give up; I used to be a follower, but I have become more of a leader; I have always been a leader, but I've become more humble and able to follow others; I am creative; I love a challenge; I have overcome my fears and feel strong.)

Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

from Wow Online – College Essay

Instructions

Before you decide what to write about, you'll want to explore several ideas. Depending on which essay you are writing, you could approach this task in different ways:

- If you are working on your Common Application essay, you might want to consider several different options from the choices they offer (a background story, a time when you experienced failure, a time when you challenged a belief, etc.), or you might have several ideas in one area (e.g., several background stories, several places where you are content.)
- If you are responding to a prompt other than the Common Application, keep an open mind and consider various stories that could effectively show readers something meaningful about you.

Example #1

Prompt	Common App (A background story)
Story Idea	Teaching Ellie to swim
Notes	I worked with her all summer, she was scared, wouldn't put her face in the water, last day she finally tried it. I didn't feel frustrated, really wanted to help her. Pool was quiet that day, a little overcast, she was playful and trusted me.
What do I want readers to know about me?	I am patient and diligent. This was the first time I felt like I taught someone something. I want to do that again, whether as a swim instructor or in other aspects of my life.

Example #2

Prompt	Common App (A time I experienced failure)
Story Idea	Robotics competition
Notes	This year we almost won the State championship. Our coach always told us to focus on one important thing at a time. Under pressure, I remembered that advice, and encouraged my teammates to follow it. We worked so well together. Even though we didn't win, it was our best year yet.
What do I want readers to know about me?	I know how to focus and lead others. I apply the lessons I learn.

Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

from Wow Online – College Essay

Think of Several Ideas of Your Own

Keep in mind that you are juggling three things at once: characteristics (what you want readers to know), prompts and topics. Stay flexible and open to surprises.

Idea #1

Prompt	
Story Idea	
Notes	
What do I want readers to know about me?	

Idea #2

Prompt	
Story Idea	
Notes	
What do I want readers to know about me?	

Continue with additional ideas

Step 3: Focus on Theme
from Wow Online – College Essay

A traditional personal statement is built around a theme, which has two parts:

- 1) What happened?
- 2) Why does it matter?

Before you continue, choose one idea from the possibilities you came up with in Step 2.

What happened?

What will you write about in your essay? Choose one scene/experience/moment from the ideas you came up with in Step 2.

Why does it matter?

What does this topic illustrate that the reader wouldn't know from the rest of your application? Focus on characteristics, not accomplishments.

