

Common Application Prompts

Below are the five options with some general tips for each:

Option #1: Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

"Identity" is at the heart of this prompt. What is it that makes you you? The prompt gives you a lot of latitude for answering the question since you can write about your "background or story." Your "background" can be a broad environmental factor that contributed to your development such as growing up in a military family, living in an interesting place, or dealing with an unusual family situation. Your "story" could be an event or series of events that had a profound impact on your identity. However you approach the prompt, make sure you are inward looking and explain how and why your identity was influenced by your background or story.

Option #2: Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?

This prompt may seem to go against everything that you've learned on your path to college. It's far more comfortable in an application to celebrate successes and accomplishments than it is to discuss failure. At the same time, you'll impress the college admissions folks greatly if you can show your ability to learn from your failures and mistakes. Be sure to devote significant space to the second half of the question – what was your response to failure, and how did you learn and grow from the experience? Introspection and honesty is key with this prompt.

Option #3: Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

Keep in mind how open-ended this prompt truly is. The "belief or idea" you explore could be your own, someone else's, or that of a group. The best essays will be honest as they explore the difficulty of working against the status quo or a firmly held belief, and the answer to the final question – would you make the same decision again – need not be "yes." Sometimes in retrospection we discover that the cost of an action was perhaps too great. However you approach this prompt, your essay needs to reveal one of your core personal values. If the belief you challenged doesn't give the admissions folks a window into your personality, then you haven't succeeded with this prompt.

Option #4: Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?

Here again the Common Application gives you a lot of options for approaching the question. A "place or environment" could be many things – a house, a classroom, a tree top, a church, a stadium, a stage, a family, a country, an imagined space, a book, an internal place, and so on. Think about where and when you are most content, and then analyze the source of that contentedness. Keep in mind that the "why" at the end of the prompt is essential. This essay prompt, like all of the options, is asking you to be introspective and share with the admissions folks what it is that you value.

Note that this option is similar to prompt #1 on the University of California application.

Option #5: Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

I'm not a fan of the way this prompt is worded for it suggests that a single event or accomplishment can be so transformative that one becomes an adult overnight. Maturity comes as the result of a long train of events and accomplishments (and failures). That said, this prompt is an excellent choice if you want to explore a single event or achievement that marked a clear milestone in your personal development. Be careful to avoid the "hero" essay – admissions offices are often overrun with essays about the season-winning touchdown or brilliant performance in the school play. These can certainly be fine topics for an essay, but make sure your essay is analyzing your personal growth process, not bragging about an accomplishment.

Some Final Thoughts: Whichever prompt you chose, make sure you are looking inward. What do you value? What has made you grow as a person? What makes you the unique individual the admissions folks will want to invite to join their campus community? The best essays spend significant time with self-analysis, and they don't spend a disproportionate amount of time merely describing a place or event. Analysis, not description, will reveal the critical thinking skills that are the hallmark of a promising college student.

If you find yourself grumbling about the loss of the "Topic of Your Choice" option for the essay, keep in mind that all five of the new prompts allow for great flexibility and creativity. The folks at The Common Application have cast a wide net with these questions, and nearly anything you want to write about could fit under at least one of the options.