

Tips to Answering the Common App Essay Questions

How to Choose Which Topic to Pursue

Look at each topic and ask yourself what personal experiences come to mind. Write them down, and then look your list over.

- **Chances are, the experiences that are most meaningful to you will make great themes for your essay.**
- **Experiment with several topics before picking one.** This will help you uncover the deeper connections that will bring your essay to life. *Keep in mind that certain themes are overused and should be avoided unless you have a particularly unique angle.* These include death, divorce, sports, travel, religion, politics, and brief volunteer experiences.

Essay Questions:

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.

"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.

By also including "interest" and "talent," this is to help students realize this prompt is not just for the "I come from a culturally-underrepresented group" crowd.

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?

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. The key to questions like this one: don't dwell on your failures but emphasize how you've overcome challenges and are now stronger, wiser, and better for them. If you choose this prompt, you need to be very particular about the challenge you decide to reveal. Don't make it be anything that causes admissions offices to question your character, judgment, or integrity. I've always advised students that the best "failures" to talk about are the ones that are not really your fault. For example, you love singing but are completely tone deaf and couldn't get a part in the school musical to save your life, so you decided to become a music critic for your local newspaper. No one can fault you for being a bad singer. But they can applaud your ability to turn lemons into lemonade.

Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

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.

Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, or 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.

This question wants to know your values and your thought process. How and what you value will be evident based on your topic. This can also gauge how you respond under pressure. If you choose an intellectual challenge consider whether or not it is relevant to the topic you wish to study in college. Perhaps this concept is more abstract than concrete. This prompt does not require you to have the solution but rather would prefer to see how you could go about working on one. If a theoretical solution is possible it is not necessary.

Make sure that the essay says enough about YOU. Sure, you'd like to solve the problem of a global water shortage. But don't just tell colleges why it's a problem: tell them what you've done about it. But personally, I think the best essays for this prompt are not "save the world" kind of essays. Maybe you watched your friend in a wheelchair struggle with the supposedly accessible walkways and ramps at your school and lobbied for a solution. Or maybe you were frustrated with the cost of textbooks and instituted a book exchange program. Admissions offices are looking for your thought process, creativity, and determination here, not the scale of your problem or solution.

Discuss an accomplishment event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

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. The trick to this essay is to think about the moments or events in life that have caused you to fundamentally change as a person or to see the world differently.

Final Thoughts: Whichever prompt you choose, 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 will want to invite to join their campus community? *The best essays spend significant time with self-analysis rather than merely describing a place or event.* Analysis, not description, will reveal the critical thinking skills that are the hallmark of a promising college student.