

# Guide to the College Essay

How to Write a Compelling Personal Statement



## Introduction

If you are entering your senior year, you are probably turning your attention to your next big project: the college application. While many parts of the application are relatively straightforward, nothing brings as much dread or anxiety as the personal essay (or rather *essays*, as many of you will be writing more than one!). Your anxiety is not entirely unfounded. While most students have become pros at writing thesis statements and research papers, few have done much creative writing or personal narrative writing. So this guide is here to help you!

**While we have organized this guide around Common App, these guidelines also apply for other application systems, including Coalition, ApplyTexas, and others.**

Let's begin by discussing the GOAL of the personal essay. Why do colleges ask you to write it? What are they looking for?

- 1. Colleges want to learn something about you that they can't know by just reading your transcript or activities list.** It's called a *personal* statement for a reason: they want to know about you as a *person*. This is your opportunity to make yourself memorable! It is an opportunity to show off your personality, your character, and your values. Your essay should not be a long form retelling of your activities list. Your essay should delve into personal qualities and experiences that help build a complete picture of who you are and how you will continue to grow as a person.
- 2. Colleges want to know how you will contribute to their campus culture and community.** They want to understand what you value and what drives you to do what you do beyond the classroom. You could have a nearly identical transcript and activities list to another student, but be pursuing those activities or classes for vastly different reasons. The essay gives you the opportunity to reveal what you truly care about in life and how you will continue to use those passions and interests to enrich the college you attend.
- 3. Colleges want to see your writing ability.** While there is quite a bit of room for creativity here, colleges are still evaluating your writing ability so it is important to write well!

**In short, colleges want to get to know you and your true character.** Who is this person they may potentially admit to their college and what qualities will you bring with you to campus?

## How to Write About Covid-19

Common App and Coalition application have added questions that provide students the opportunity to write about how COVID-19 has impacted them personally and academically. So the question is: should you use this section to write about your pandemic experience or not?

While all of us have experienced a level of disappointment and sadness during this pandemic, some students' lives have been severely impacted. Perhaps one of your parents lost their job, someone in your family had major health issues related to COVID-19, your responsibilities at home have substantially increased, or you weren't able to achieve your academic potential due to limited computer or internet access. If this is you, then you should definitely use the questions provided to write about your experience. You can get creative with the essay if you want, but you don't need to. Focus on providing all relevant details and clearly explaining your experience. Remember this section still needs to be about **you**, so don't get lost in the details and leave out how you are personally affected.

If you are someone who experienced great sadness because your choir performances, state track meets, or family vacation were canceled, we understand that feeling. However, we do not recommend writing about those disappointments because your experience is essentially universal. It has happened to all of us. This space should be reserved for students who need to provide critical context to their application in light of COVID-19.

There may be some students who didn't face significant challenges during COVID-19, but who initiated or were given unique opportunities that came as a direct result of the pandemic. If these opportunities had a significant impact on your life and growth as a person, you could potentially write about them in this section. But again, please ensure this is directly related to the pandemic and not a way to squeeze in more of your extracurricular accomplishments.

## 2020-2021 Common App Prompts

*These are the prompts for the 2020-2021 admission cycle. Remember that on Common App, you will be required to answer one of these questions within a limit of 650 words. Your final draft should be between 500 and 650 words.*

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, 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. 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 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, 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 it makes you lose all 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.

### Student Sample A

As you read the following essay, consider how the writer reveals her personal qualities, what she cares about, and how she will help build the community on her college campus.

A bustling small town rose to a new day. Franklin rolled down the road in his old bus, greeting passersby, and Martha eagerly walked over to the hospital for her first day at work as a nurse, but not too eagerly to forget returning a wave to Franklin. As the day progressed, much would be going on in this small town in front of me, creating a great satisfaction as I looked on at its complexity, stretching across an expanse...of carpet?!

Yes, carpet; my 10-year-old eyes could not have been happier. Hours upon hours of time would be spent on the green carpet in the extra bedroom of my house, where a town of resurrected plastic would reside in organized chaos, under the full command of an enthusiastic adolescent. In this town, every Playmobil figure was named, had a persona, and had a story. I was in complete control. Some stories caught such hold of me, that keeping them on a green carpet would not be enough—these ideas had to make it onto paper as I discovered a newfound love for writing. I am a storyteller: deeply moved by the diversity of life and the journeys each human embarks on.

Franklin is arguably the most intentional piece of plastic you will ever meet. He was my favorite figurine since he was the bridge that connected every plastic life. As the constant bus driver, he listened intently to the fire marshall's heroic and tragic stories, shared jokes with immature middle schoolers, and said nothing at all to the soccer team returning from a heartbreaking loss. In short, Franklin fostered an environment where community could thrive.

- 1 This is not the typical personal statement introduction which has a tendency to be full of clichés. Instead, it is appealing, sounding more like the beginning of a short story, and let's talk about that last sentence! The punctuation alone is sophisticated and engaging.
- 2 Here we have an insight into who the writer is—a storyteller, and every rhetorical choice that the writer makes up to this point confirms this insight.
- 3 By referencing Franklin again, the writer solidifies the structure and cohesion of the essay. Franklin holds this essay together in a unique way that entices the audience to keep reading.

Building community became another passion that I could not leave on the carpet; I found myself pursuing this notion wholeheartedly; whether it was leading a fun mind game at a team dinner, being an enthusiastic encourager on the athletic field, or helping to bring out a quieter classmate in classroom conversations. I strive to imitate the intentionality of Franklin.

This past winter, I applied these passions to my biggest project yet: Girls Writing Mission International. I began this hopeful nonprofit in pursuit of the values that I now realize have been rooted in me for years: telling stories, building community, and enthusiastically taking action to serve. The vision is to give a voice to teenage girls in challenging and marginalized environments in order to promote awareness, encourage them in community, and provide an opportunity for them to become active impactors in their society. While still in its very beginnings, the big picture stands—to use the stories of these young women to raise funds for their community; giving them an opportunity to take action towards a specific need they see. Each day, this dream is slowly turning into a reality as I am already building relationships in the Dominican Republic, Ghana, and Papua New Guinea.

At the same time, launching this mission has pulled me far out of my comfort zone in formally communicating with various organizations and experiencing many failures. This past summer, I met with an English teacher from Papua New Guinea. After she explained how writing has become a lost art globally, I have had to grapple with creating a project that allows the girls to share their stories despite their limited writing

- 4 Notice the use of multiple short body paragraphs here. They are effective because they develop the line of reasoning, allowing the writer to build upon the previous claim, ultimately building to her final point.
- 5 There is a shift in tone here. While the writer begins the essay with a childlike tone mirroring her awe of her Playmobil world, her tone becomes more sophisticated and slightly urgent as her passions become more worldly and weighty.

abilities. Over this past year, I have had to rethink the structure for this project four times, but each setback proved first a learning experience and then an opportunity for improvement.

At 10 years old, I had built a world where everything was under my control. While I have since learned that I am not in control of life, I have built the determination to know that I can make an impact, and serving these young women through storytelling and community may just be how.

I want to be like Franklin. I want to be intentional.

### Student Sample B

I knew what my mother and father looked like from the photo albums my grandparents stored around the house. I knew what they sounded like from their weekly phone calls. I also knew how they used to act around me from the videotapes they filmed when I was only a few months old. But I did not remember my parents as real people. To me, they were an invisible presence watching over me every day. In the summertime, I would go to the beach with my grandparents and watch helicopters flying overhead every few hours, dropping plastic beach balls onto the sand. My parents used to send me toys from the U.S., so I would close my eyes and imagine that my parents were in the helicopters throwing down the toys for me. I told my grandparents that my parents came all the way from New York to bring them to me, but they had to return to New York right away.

When I was her only one, my parents risked everything they had and emigrated from Romania to the United States. They knew they faced difficulties there, so they made the

6 This essay is impressive, but there may be a missed opportunity here. Perhaps the writer could have juxtaposed this setback with a setback she encountered building her Playmobil community.

7 This is a great final sentence. It is concise, yet revealing and ties the essay all together.

1 In the first sentence, the writer reveals that her life experience is not a common one. This is a one-of-a-kind story that only this student can tell. College admissions officers have never read an essay that says this.

2 There is a sense of vulnerability here that is engaging.

3 As the essay progresses, the writer reveals more about her family dynamic. To make this essay a little more impactful, the writer could add more imagery, perhaps a simile or metaphor to help the reader relate the writer's experience.

agonizing and difficult decision to leave me in Romania with my grandparents until they were settled in the States. As I got older my mother told me that the decision haunted her: she couldn't even look at young children without thinking of me in Romania and bursting into tears. But as a little child, I never thought anything was strange about the way I grew up. I just had two sets of parents who both equally loved me and cared for me. When I moved to the United States at the age of six, I remember being terrified of losing my grandparents, even as I reunited with my parents. My grandfather has since passed away, but my grandmother comes to visit us every year. When she is back home in Romania, I call her every day and she is the first person to know about my successes and failures at school or on the tennis court. When she is not with me, count the days until I see her again and when we are together, I feel as if nothing has ever changed.

Even though it was extremely difficult for my parents to move to the United States without me, I am grateful for those five years in Romania, where I came to learn Romanian, understand its culture, and live with my extended family. Had my parents brought me here from the beginning, I probably wouldn't speak Romanian or be able to communicate with my grandparents. I also wouldn't care about celebrating Romanian holiday traditions because I would have grown up only with American traditions. I wouldn't know my extended family as my own, or my grandparents as my second parents. In making difficult decisions and sacrificing themselves for my sake, my parents and grandparents gave me two cultures, two identities, and a better understanding of who I am.

4

4 This is a great conclusion with an insightful reflection on how the writer's experience has impacted her life. The student has revealed an identity that is incredibly unique, which is the exact purpose of the college essay.

## Five Mistakes Students Make On their College Essays

### 1. Your essay is too generic

- a) Steer clear of cliches, platitudes, or overused topics. Don't write about what you've learned from playing sports or the death of your favorite pet. While important parts of your life, they are not necessarily unique to you. When in doubt, think small. Sometimes it is the most mundane moments in life that make the best essays.

### 2. You write a resume essay

- a) Your essay should **not** be a more detailed version of your activities list and accomplishments. Remember that the essay is your chance to tell the admissions office something new about yourself! If you do mention one of your activities, make sure you write about it in a way that truly reveals your values and character.

### 3. Your essay is too personal

- a) While a good essay involves a certain level of vulnerability, there are some topics that you should probably stay away from. Don't over-share or get too sappy.

### 4. You ask too many people to read and edit your essay

- a) It can be tempting to get feedback from multiple sources, however this usually leads to confusion and contradictory advice. It also ends up weakening your voice as the author. Stick with one or two trusted advisors during the writing process.

### 5. You don't revise enough

- a) You should plan on revising your essay at least six times, especially if narrative writing is new for you. It will take multiple revisions to tell a memorable story that displays your authentic voice and gives colleges a robust picture of who you are and how you will contribute to their campus.

## Revising Your Personal Statement

### Introduction

The introduction of your personal statement is crucial. Not to be overly dramatic, but the first few sentences often determine whether your reader will continue reading or just move on to the next part of your application. The introduction also establishes the structure of your essay, and a clear structure will result in a focused essay. So, let's take a look at what a bland introduction can turn into with a little more effort.

**Prompt #1:** "Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, please share your story."

### Original

My name is Sarah Sarahson, and my high school journey has been one complicated ride. High school has provided me with many challenges and new experiences that I wouldn't have been able to experience if it weren't for the amazing drill team that I made my freshman year. I am a sergeant on the team, and I am proud to have experienced my high school adventures while being on this team.

### Revised

As my alarm goes off at 4:30 AM for the fifth day in a row, there is nothing that I want to do more than hit the snooze button, roll over, and sleep for three more hours like most of my classmates. But, I know that it is a fleeting feeling, one that I have battled for two years since I first became a member of my school's dance team. Once I get to our studio, say hello to my closest friends, warm up my stiff body, and let the soft music take over, I will be happy that I did not hit that snooze button because that decision to be part of something bigger than myself, to dedicate hours of time to a craft, to love something so deeply that sacrifice is necessary has shaped me into who I am today.

*This introduction does not provide any real insight about the writer, other than her actual name. There is nothing authentic or unique about this introduction; hundreds of students could copy and paste it, change the name, and use it as their own. That is exactly what we want to avoid! Another issue with this intro is that it lacks a focus—the reader may find it difficult to identify whether the student is writing about an identity, a challenge, or an experience.*

*This introduction is much more engaging. It reveals the writer's "voice," while also clearly addressing the prompt: the writer identifies as a dancer. It also foreshadows the structure of the essay—the writer will discuss how being part of something, honing a craft, and making sacrifices has shaped who she is.*

## Body Paragraphs

The body paragraphs of your personal statement are where you can stretch your wings as a writer. In the college essay, you are not required to follow a formulaic five-paragraph essay; in fact, we encourage you to stay away from this structure. Instead, your body paragraphs should shape your essay in a manner that best illustrates your story and develops an effective line of reasoning.

**Prompt #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?”

### Original

On the first day of basketball tryouts, I could tell that I was in trouble. The other players were bigger, faster, and stronger than I was. By Day 3, I could see the writing on the wall. I knew that I was going to be cut. As I was called into the coach’s office, I braced myself for the bad news, and even though the news was bad, there was a bright spot. The coach could see that I loved basketball, so he invited me to become a manager. I would still be part of the team.

### Revised

On the first day of basketball tryouts, I could tell that I was in trouble. As I stood along the baseline of the court, I was among giants. Their hands were bigger than mine, their legs longer than mine, and most importantly, their confidence was greater than mine. I quickly identified the leader of the court and wouldn’t you know it, we played the same position. He was everything that I was not, smooth with his passes, quick with his shot, aggressive on defense, and vocal with his teammates. To put it mildly, I was a little intimidated, but I knew that I might have one asset that my competition did not. I had made my dad a promise before he left for his latest military tour: I would make the team. I had to follow through on my promise; he had followed through on so many of his, and despite my doubts and my fears, I knew that I would return the next day.

*This paragraph has the potential to be good! The components are there: the writer did not make the basketball team but is able to still be part of the team in a different role. However, it lacks detail and imagery. There seems to be no real voice because the writer is simply telling rather than showing.*

*This revised version is much stronger—and now, the writer can turn one paragraph into a complete essay because he is adding so many details. There is imagery, juxtaposition, personal details which develop the writer’s voice. Now, we begin to see why this setback was so significant to the writer which he can weave in between the details of the actual tryouts, setting him up for a strong conclusion.*

If you have not sensed a theme yet, here it is: every part of your college essay is important.

## Conclusion

The conclusion may even be the most important part of the statement. This is the last impression you will make on your reader, so it must be powerful, and it must connect to the reader.

**Prompt #6:** “Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?”

## Original

Although many older people may believe that Tik Tok is waste of time, it has allowed me to learn new things and connect with my friends. This interest in learning new things will carry on to my college education, making me a stronger student.

## Revised

As I pursue my study of environmental science, I will gain a better understanding of our waste habits around the world and work tirelessly to improve our practices that are harmful. What started out as a mindless venture “down the rabbit hole” has changed my future. My passion for improving our environment was once *just* a passion, but now, because of the strategies that I learned on Tik Tok, my passion is actionable, and I have a platform on which to share those actions. Teaching others how to live a life of zero waste empowers me and my audience, and when my parents ask if I am “tik tocking” again, I am able to remind them that yes, while I am *on* Tik Tok again, I am educating myself so that I can educate others and make a difference on my college campus and maybe, just maybe, the world.

*While it is not the end of the world that this writer has chosen to write an entire personal statement over Tik Tok, the conclusion is not well-executed. Based on the vagueness of the conclusion, the writer likely explained how the things they learned and how they have stay connected with friends through Tik Tok, but how will these qualities specifically contribute to the academic success in college?*

*Here is a great example of how a writer can spin the narrative. Although many students stay away from writing about social media that may have a negative connotation, this writer embraces the challenge and successfully exhibits how losing tracking of time on Tik Tok could be a good thing. The writer also references their area of educational interest and suggests that he will improve the environment on his college campus, making a final connection to the reader.*

## How to Tell a Compelling Story for your Personal Essay

First, begin with the end in mind: What do you want the reader to know about you after reading your essay? Take some time to answer the following questions:

- a) What do you care about?
- b) What qualities or talents or superpowers will you bring to a campus that set you apart?
- c) What experiences have shaped who you are as a person?

*Write or type your responses in this area.*

Second, brainstorm some stories or anecdotes that illustrate these qualities. Think of experiences that are unique to you and stories that only you can tell. Here are a few questions to get you thinking:

- a) How do you spend your time outside of school and academics? Why?
- b) Do you have any weird hobbies or secret talents?
- c) What new skills have you learned in the past few years? Are you self-taught?
- d) Have you experienced any epic failures or surprising successes?
- e) Have you experienced any life-changing hardships or conflicts?
- f) Think small: what seemingly simple or mundane experiences in your life can you write about in a new and fresh way?

*Write or type your responses in this area.*

Finally, work on bringing your story to life.

- a) Get specific. Avoid generalities, cliches, and abstract statements.
- b) Use concrete details, visual images, and authentic to you anecdotes to transport your reader into the story.
- c) Hook your audience with an intriguing opening that leaves them wanting more.
- d) Be honest and vulnerable. Vulnerability allows you to connect with your reader.
- e) Connect your story to your personal qualities. Make sure your essay clearly illustrates the values, character traits, and interests you want colleges to know about you.

*Write or type your responses in this area.*

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