



The College Application Essay

A Guide for Tutors

Just How Important Is It?

- Importance varies by college
- Not as important as GPA or test scores
- BUT...
- Can push a marginal candidate over the top
- Can help determine fit



Three Types of Question

- The “You” Question
- The “Why Us” Question
- The Creative Question

Examples of “You” Questions

COMMON APP 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.
- 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?
- Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

From <https://www.commonapp.org/blog/2019-2020-common-app-essay-prompts>

SPECIFIC VALUE QUESTIONS

- In the spirit of Saint Augustine, we believe that everyone in the Villanova community learns from each other. What is a lesson that you have learned in your life so far that you will share with others?
- At Pitzer, five core values distinguish our approach to education: social responsibility, intercultural understanding, interdisciplinary learning, student engagement and environmental sustainability. As agents of change, our students utilize these values to create solutions to our world's challenges. Please answer only ONE of the following prompts in 650 words.

Examples of “Why Us” Questions

- Please share how you believe your experiences, perspectives, and/or talents have shaped your ability to contribute to and enrich the learning environment at UT Austin, both in and out of the classroom.
- Why are you interested in American University?
- What about being a student at Boston University most excites you?

Examples of Creative Questions

- “You are required to spend the next year of your life in either the past or the future. What year would you travel to and why?” (Brandeis University)
- “You’ve just reached your one millionth hit on your YouTube video. What is the video about?” (Lehigh University)
- “Take a blank sheet of paper. Do with this page what you wish. Your only limitations are the boundaries of this page. You don’t have to submit anything, but we hope you will use your imagination.” (Texas Christian University)

Brainstorming Topics

- Students often struggle with writing about themselves.
- Guide students through the wording of the question.
- Help students identify themes in their own stories.
- Students do not need “dramatic” moments to write about - small moments that represent core values are what matter most.
- Encourage free writing to develop ideas.



A Few Tips on Word Count

- College Application Essays tend to have short word counts, usually under 500-700 words, with supplements sometimes only 100 words.
- Tell students not to worry about word count on the first draft.
- Encourage students to pare down to the essence of the story.
- Help students identify repetition and unnecessary description.

STRUCTURE

- Encourage students to open with anecdote when appropriate for the topic. (More on that soon...)
- With these essays being so short, encourage students to address the prompt clearly. Make sure the story addresses the prompt.
- **BIG CLOSING** - Try to connect the story to a larger theme about life.

Some Tips on Anecdotes

- Anecdotes can be a powerful and engaging way to open an essay.
- **COLD HOOK:** Open in the middle of the story, such as a line of dialogue or a moment of action.
- **Keep it brief!** No more than a few sentences.

Examples of Anecdotes

“I kept a firm grip on the rainbow trout as I removed the lure from its lip. Then, my heart racing with excitement, I lowered the fish to the water and watched it flash away.”

- Dylan Morse, Ithaca, NY

“There is nothing more irrepressibly badass than the old women of southern Greece. They have never seen a dentist. They can clean their own teeth, thank you very much, all two of them. They are familiar with loss.”

- Sage Tzamouranis, Ridgefield, Conn.

From <https://www.hamilton.edu/admission/apply/college-essays-that-worked>

The Final Words

- Closings are just as important as openings. Maybe more important?
- Return to the larger theme of the essay. Do not encourage summaries.
- Avoid famous quotes. Let the words of the student shine.
- Circular Structure: If the student opened with an anecdote, return to that anecdote.

EX. I like to think that the other widows also have secret stashes of light, brightly colored clothing. The olive trees flourish and yield fruit despite the oppression of the sun. There can be beauty in spite of loss.

QUESTIONS?