



THE COLLEGE ESSAY & INTERVIEW

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BRAINSTORMING EXERCISE



THE COLLEGE ESSAY GUY: VALUES AND INSIGHT

- “Insight is the why of the what: not the details of your life themselves (though those are really important for your reader to understand you), but what those details taught you, how they shaped you, the reflection and commentary you provide as you present yourself to schools. This part of your writing is where you demonstrate your ability to reflect, show what makes you curious, and share what you’ve learned in life. The deeper you can make it, the better.”
- Exercise: Values

- personal development
- recognition
- accountability
- inspiration
- music
- helping others
- peace
- diversity
- expertise
- vulnerability
- global awareness
- hunger
- my country
- sleep
- productivity
- intuition

- wealth
- creativity
- knowledge
- inclusion
- curiosity
- gratitude
- faith
- communication
- interdependence
- efficiency
- stability
- humor
- truth
- order
- excellence
- religion
- beauty

- loyalty
- courage
- self-love
- ritual
- purpose
- privacy
- freedom
- quiet
- compassion
- cooperation
- growth
- authenticity
- practicality
- nature
- objectivity
- leadership
- wisdom

- culture
- healthy boundaries
- second chances
- listening
- family
- excitement
- travel
- adventure
- laughter
- entrepreneurship
- wonder
- health and fitness
- love
- close relationships
- humility
- art
- responsibility
- safety

- meaningful work
- trust
- self-expression
- fun
- rationality
- democracy
- self-control
- balance
- adaptability
- success
- independence
- variety
- community
- patience
- challenges
- autonomy
- _____
- _____

- respect
- strength
- flexibility
- financial stability
- empathy
- belonging
- equity
- resourcefulness
- decisiveness
- competence
- collaboration
- spirituality
- social change
- honesty
- mindfulness
- grace
- _____
- _____



DESIGN A THOUGHTFUL APPLICATION PROCESS

THOROUGH RESEARCH LEADS TO A BETTER ESSAY



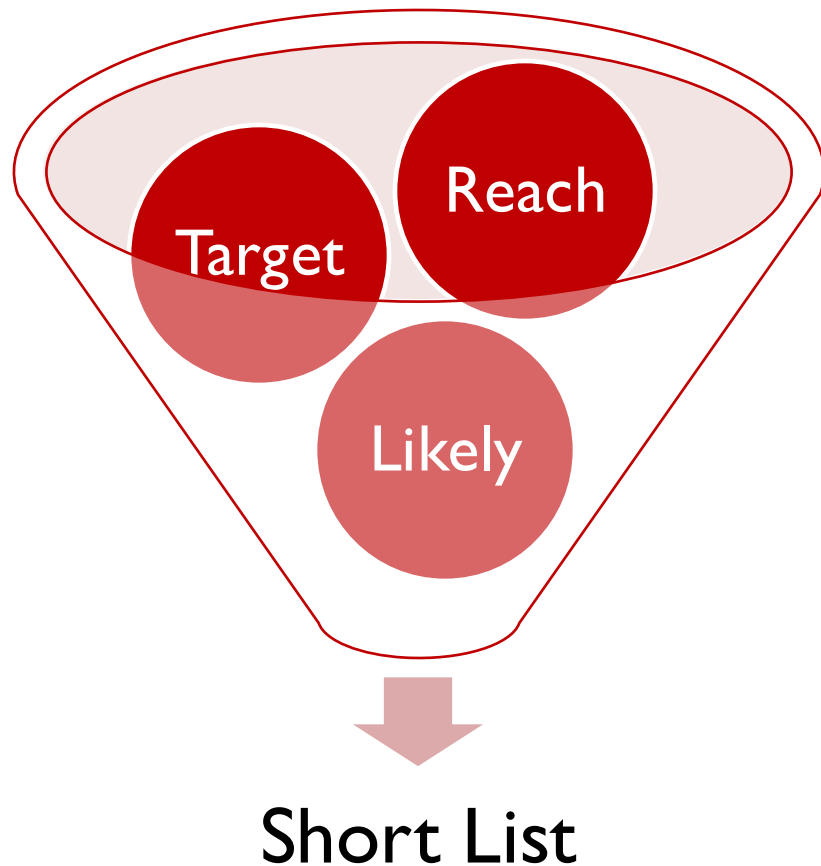
CONSTRUCTING THE APPLICATION

- Tell your stories
 - What are you passionate about? What do you value? How do you thrive?
- Organize your achievements
- Address areas for growth head on
- Read the instructions
- Enlist a proofreader
- Use your resources
- Give yourself plenty of time



"I want to show my colleges I'm well-rounded, so I wrote a poem in Spanish about how chess club has made me a better quarterback."

DESIGN A THOUGHTFUL SEARCH AND DEMONSTRATING UNDERSTANDING



Strong essays that demonstrate understanding are often a product of a **well-researched and well-designed search process.**

An aerial photograph of a college campus. The image shows several large, multi-story buildings with light-colored facades and dark roofs. The campus is heavily landscaped with numerous green trees of various sizes. A paved road or path runs through the lower left portion of the image. The overall scene is a typical representation of a university environment.

DEMONSTRATING INTEREST, DEMONSTRATING UNDERSTANDING

- Why?
 - Aids in your research process
 - Get a more fulsome picture of the college and its community
 - Venture beyond a scripted tour, information session, website, email, etc.
 - Control part of the admissions process
 - College's care because it's a really crowded field and they're protecting their yield (they also genuinely want you to take time to get to know their college)
- Ways to Demonstrate Interest (In-Person or Virtually)
 - Visiting campus
 - Sending and email and following up (even opening emails)
 - Writing a thank you note
 - Attending a high school visit, reception, or other event(s)
 - Recruiting or athletic visit
 - Interviewing



EXPLORE THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

- Explore the food, retail, and resources
- Consider what services might be important to you in a surrounding community
- Evaluate transportation options

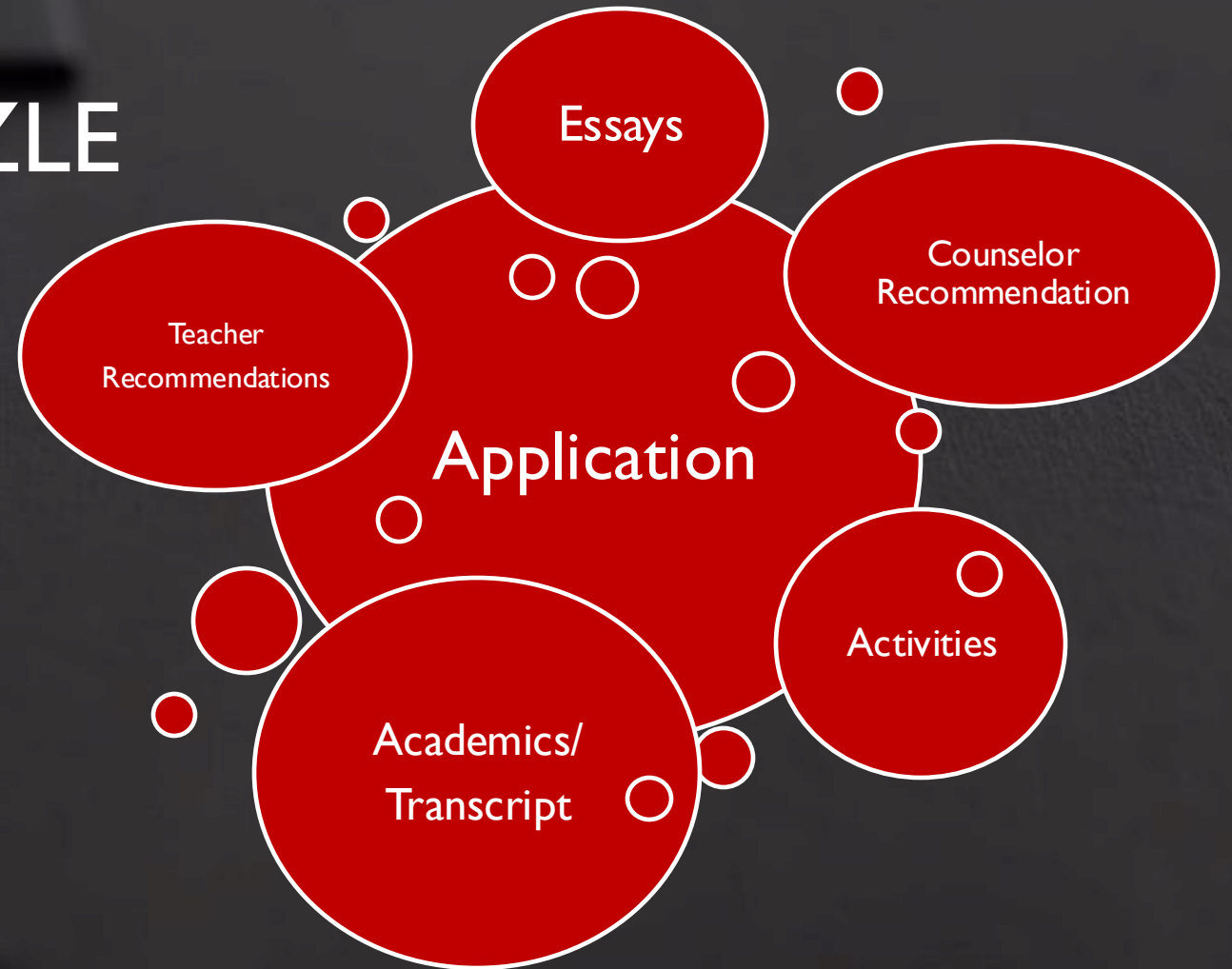




THE INTERVIEW

- Consider the timing and type (admissions counselor, alumni, students)
- Prepare appropriately
- Practice
- Consider what you might be hoping to convey
- Understand the difference between being proud of yourself and your accomplishments and bragging
- Generate questions in advance
- Using AI

PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

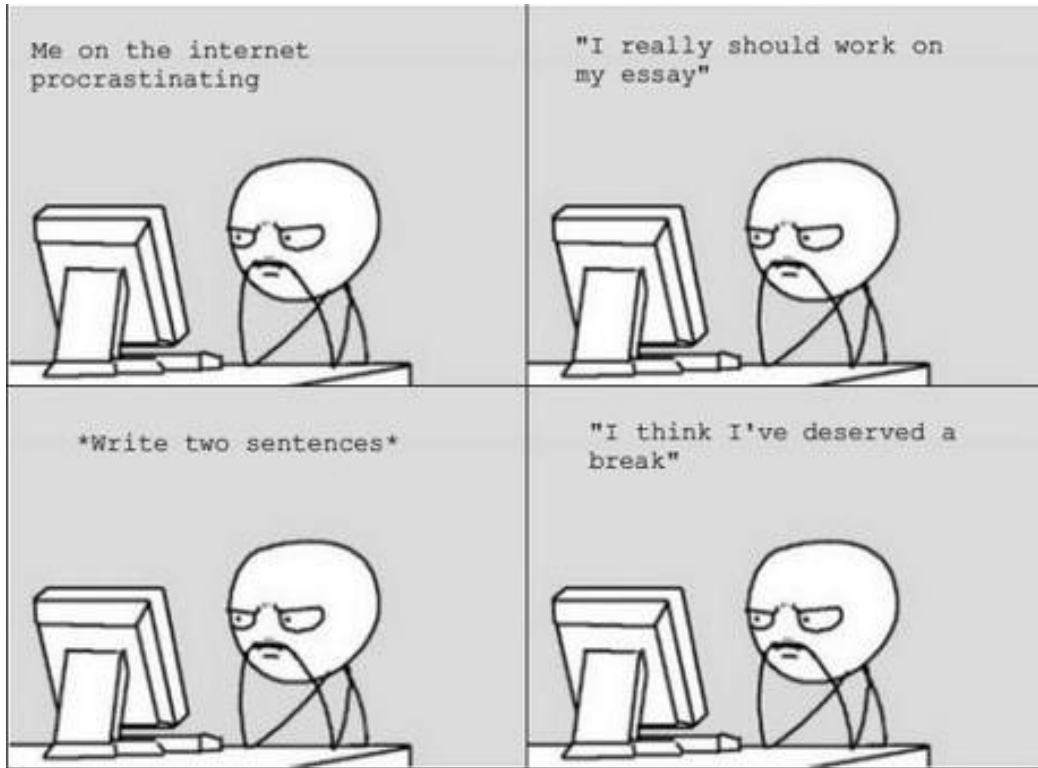




THE ESSAY



ROLE OF THE ESSAY



- Tell **your** story. Demonstrate your capacity for self-reflection.
- Highlight a strength, emphasize or explain a relevant topic or point, add nuance, say what has yet to have been said
- Demonstrate your creativity, style, and ability to write well
- For colleges, we want to know what you value, how you think and creatively solve problems, and how you might “fit” with our community.



CHOICE OF TOPIC

- The focus should be on you, the student
- Be sure you have evidence/examples to marshal. Focus on the why more than the what
- Avoid:
 - Topics that are too broad or too general
 - World problems (tend to require research and end up sounding like research papers)
 - Life histories or long lists of just achievements (say more and more about less and less: focus)
 - Overly personal details and/or romantic relationships
 - Essays about people who have influenced you—be sure that the influence is clear
- Skip the gimmicks

A NOTE ABOUT AI





WRITE A 650-WORD ESSAY ABOUT A TIME WHEN YOU QUESTIONED OR CHALLENGED A BELIEF OR IDEA.

Introduction: Beliefs and ideas shape our understanding of the world and guide our decisions. However, there are moments when we question the validity of these beliefs and challenge the established norms. In this essay, I will share a personal experience in which I questioned a prevalent societal belief about success, delving into the factors that prompted my thinking and examining the transformative outcome it brought forth.

Prompting the Thinking: Growing up, I was immersed in a culture that equated success with conventional measures such as wealth, prestige, and societal recognition. This belief was deeply ingrained, reinforced by the media, my educational environment, and societal expectations. I accepted this definition of success without questioning its validity until a pivotal moment during my college years.

During a university seminar on self-discovery and purpose, we engaged in discussions about the true meaning of success. The readings and discussions challenged the traditional notion of success, encouraging us to explore our personal values, passions, and intrinsic motivations. This marked the beginning of a journey that prompted me to question the existing paradigm and seek a deeper understanding of success.

Exploring Alternative Perspectives: To expand my understanding and challenge the conventional beliefs surrounding success, I sought out alternative perspectives. I engaged in conversations with individuals from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and fields of expertise. These conversations exposed me to a wide range of experiences and interpretations of success.

One particularly enlightening discussion was with a social entrepreneur who had dedicated their life to creating positive change in underserved communities. They redefined success as the ability to make a meaningful impact in the lives of others, regardless of material wealth or societal recognition. Their stories and insights inspired me to reconsider my own definition of success and encouraged me to examine the impact I could have through my own passions and talents.

Outcome and Personal Growth: As I delved deeper into questioning the conventional belief about success, I experienced a profound shift in my perspective. I realized that success was not solely measured by external achievements but was deeply intertwined with personal fulfillment, happiness, and the ability to contribute to the well-being of others. This realization prompted me to align my values and aspirations with my own unique definition of success.

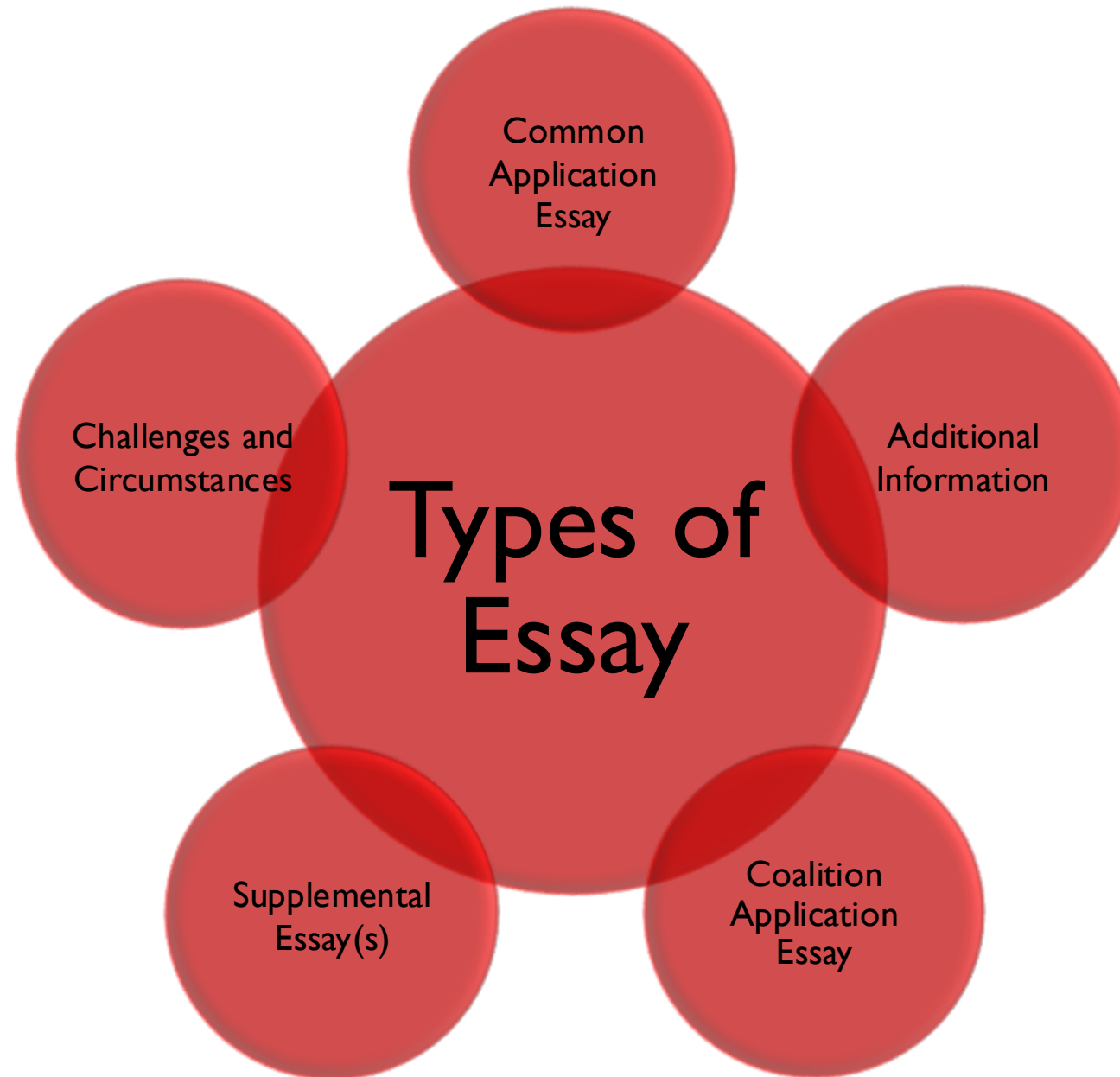
Embracing this new understanding of success led me on a path of self-discovery. I began exploring my passions and talents, seeking opportunities that aligned with my personal values. I shifted my focus from external validation to internal satisfaction, finding joy in pursuing endeavors that brought me a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

The outcome of this transformative journey was not only a newfound sense of contentment but also a renewed drive to make a positive impact in the world. I became involved in community initiatives, volunteering my time and skills to uplift those in need. I realized that success, as I now understood it, was not a solitary pursuit but a collective endeavor, with the potential to create a ripple effect of positive change.

Conclusion: Challenging societal beliefs and redefining our own understanding of success is a courageous and transformative process. Through my personal journey of questioning the conventional measures of success, I broke free from societal expectations and found my own path to fulfillment and purpose. By embracing alternative perspectives and aligning my actions with my values, I discovered that success goes beyond material wealth and external recognition.

This experience has taught me the importance of critical thinking and the power of personal reflection. It has allowed me to navigate my life with intention, focusing on what truly matters to me rather than conforming to societal expectations. I have come to believe that success is a deeply personal and multifaceted concept, unique to each individual.

In a world driven by external validation and predefined notions of success, it is essential to challenge and question the beliefs that shape our lives. By doing so, we open ourselves up to new possibilities, find



COALITION APPLICATION ESSAY PROMPTS

Essay prompts (for 2024-26 & 2025-26)

1. Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.
2. What interests or excites you? How does it shape who you are now or who you might become in the future?
3. Describe a time when you had a positive impact on others. What were the challenges? What were the rewards?
4. Has there been a time when an idea or belief of yours was questioned? How did you respond? What did you learn?
5. What success have you achieved or obstacle have you faced? What advice would you give a sibling or friend going through a similar experience?
6. Submit an essay on a topic of your choice.

COMMON APPLICATION: NEW FOR THIS YEAR

- The current “Community disruption” question will be updated to a “Challenges and circumstances” question. The new question language will expand to capture a broader range of impacts students may experience. The word/character limit will remain the same (first-year app 250 words max, transfer app 1250 characters max).
- The “Additional information” question word/character limit will be reduced. The first-year app limit will be reduced from 650 to 300 words max. The transfer app limit will be reduced from 3500 to 1500 characters max.
- The seven essay prompts will remain unchanged. The 650-word limit will also remain the same.

COMMON APPLICATION PROMPTS 2025-2026

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 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. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
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 that 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.

POPULAR PROMPTS

“In most recent cycle reported by the Common App, the most frequently selected topic was #7, the ‘topic of your choice’ essay. This prompt was chosen by 24.1% of applicants. Prompt #5, the ‘discuss an accomplishment’ essay was a close second, attracting 23.7% of seniors. The bronze medal went to prompt #2, the ‘challenge, setback, or failure’ themed essay, which netted 21.1% of Common App filers. Overall, the three most popular prompts accounted for 68.9% of applicants.”

UNDERSTANDING THE SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY



- Potential Purpose
 - Fit to major and campus community
 - Demonstrated interest
 - Institutional priorities
- Potential Topics
 - Why X college essay
 - Why college major
 - Diversity essay or community contributions essay


Source: <https://www.collegeessayguy.com/supplemental-essays>

SAMPLE SUPPLEMENTAL PROMPTS

- “Winston Churchill believed ‘a joke is a very serious thing.’ Tell us your favorite joke and try to explain the joke without ruining it.” –University of Chicago
- Joan of Arkansas. Queen Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Babe Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Mash up a historical figure with a new time period, environment, location, or occupation, and tell us their story. –University of Chicago
- What’s so odd about odd numbers? –University of Chicago
- “Anna Quindlen says that she ‘majored in unafraid’ at Barnard. Tell us about a time when you majored in unafraid.” –Barnard College
- “What matters to you, and why?” –Stanford University
- “Imagine looking through a window. What are you seeing and why it is meaningful to you?” –Williams College
- “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
- “Give us your ‘Top Ten’ list.” –Wake Forest University
- Supreme Court 2023 Decision and Supplemental Prompts

A black and white photograph showing a close-up of a printer's internal mechanism, specifically a large black roller. The roller is positioned diagonally across the frame. To the right of the roller, a sheet of paper is visible, appearing blurred due to motion. On the left side of the image, there is a large, solid red rectangular area that serves as a background for the text.

SAMPLE ESSAYS



I am applying to Dickenson because of something that really resonated with me at the information session during my visit to the college. The admissions counselor who led the information session was describing some of the classes offered at Dickenson. One such class explored social norms and in this exploration, encouraged students to break them. This appealed to me in many ways. First, I find this subject to be very interesting. I have been lucky enough to be able to travel to many places in my life and the social norms are all very different. Whether it be Israel, Palestine, Canada, England, or France, they all have their own norms and ways of life. Norms can even be different within countries. When I visited Guatemala I noticed a dichotomy of peoples there, the Spanish, who were generally wealthy and modernized, and the native Mayans, who lived off the land in extreme poverty. I had the opportunity to meet and befriend people on both sides of this divide. The differences and similarities between different groups of people have always interested me. With a strong study abroad program coupled with the social norms class discussed, I believe that I would love an education at Dickenson. Another reason I am applying to Dickenson is because I feel that the social norms class is reflective of the rest of the classes in the school. These classes would be small, engaging, interactive, and challenging. You would have to constantly keep an open mind and think outside of the box. This is my ideal learning environment. Finally, I hope you have read this far because, I am well aware that I have spelled Dickinson incorrectly throughout this short essay (during the information session the admissions counselor warned about this mistake), but it could be considered breaking a social norm, couldn't it?

I am the champion of bacon. Or, at least, the School Board thinks I am. Personally, I believe that I am the champion of compromise.

Two years ago, in the spring of my sophomore year, I applied and was selected to become a student representative to the School Board of Directors. As a liaison between the students and the board, it is the representative's responsibility to bring school-wide student concerns before the board. In an attempt to cut down on the unhealthy offerings in the cafeteria, bacon had been eliminated from the menu. This change was met with shock and outrage by a large majority of the student body. Within the first few days of the school year, I was bombarded with requests for the issue to be brought before the School Board. And as the rookie, I was handed the now infamous "bacon issue" by my fellow student board representative.

Let's just say that I was slightly embarrassed to start my foray into public policy with a campaign to "bring back bacon".

When I brought the issue to the School Board, the members laughed. I explained that reintroducing bacon to the cafeteria wasn't just about giving people what they want; it was an opportunity to teach responsibility and healthy habits. The administration and the students were under the impression that bacon was an all or nothing kind of decision, that the school should either sell bacon all day, every day or not at all. I proposed that bacon could be offered only a few days a week. The more that I pressed the issue and reasoned with the board, the more passionate I became. I may have been fighting over bacon, but I was really advocating for students. Somehow the most frivolous and seemingly insignificant of issues had transformed into a crusade for student voice.

After almost six weeks of meetings and proposals, the first "Bacon Thursday" was launched. That morning, as students entered the building, the halls buzzed with excitement over the scent of cooking bacon in the air. I, too, was filled with excitement and pride. It was irrelevant that the result was as simple as a single item on the cafeteria menu. I had dedicated time and effort into an idea, and I could see the results. Not an A on a paper, or a ten out of ten on a quiz. This was a tangible result, and it wasn't for my own benefit.

Bacon is an unlikely vehicle of self-discovery. I managed to help the administration and the board to find a compromise that would satisfy both the students and the goal of creating a healthier menu. I have now spent nearly two years as a student representative. From this experience and those that followed, staff and students rely on me as a trustworthy resource to resolve important issues and concerns. Since my debut as the champion of bacon, I realized that I have the unique ability to find, within a polarizing issue, common ground.

Writing

Personal Essay

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.

It's in every word. It's in every letter. It's in every stroke, curve, and sharp-daggered line that floats across the page. I express myself through the words I use, but true expression comes through the way I write those words. As such, I have a talent, or interest, that most would unfortunately call pointless: calligraphy. Ever since my friend classified my handwriting as a "font," I have begun to study the different lines, edges, and ideas that came with the touch of pencil on paper. I use these fonts to express myself. *Caesar Dressing*, a font full of edgy lines and tight-knit letters, has jagged edges and sharp points of snow-tipped European mountains that I see behind closed eyes. I feel the fast switchback turns in rolling Greek hills, the Via Appia stretching before me as I tumble down cobblestone roads, lines etching themselves into sweaty palms from holding the handlebars too tight. I conjure up something ancient in each stroke of the pencil and capture it in each cramped word. My love of languages appears in these lines and dances foreign steps in the swirl of growing graphite dust. But then there's the all-powerful *Times New Roman*. Academic in nature, these words line up neat and proud, plain and comfortable. It's the preferred of typing languages, and my personal favorite in my hand-written chemistry lab book. The T's become more perpendicular, my d's more structured, more refined. The words rearrange, and reorganize themselves in my brain- I classify them into genres, whose individual fonts create stories within the barest hint of black on a blank,white canvas.

Then, I have my own handwriting. Each word, each letter, is mine. It's personal. Formed by the hands that have allowed expression in every form of the word, the words speak to me. My mood changes, and a softly dipped j is injected with a stiff, pointy line. A happy thought, and an F ragged with fire smooths in structure, folds in those barbed spikes. My writing can be indulgent, curving and swooping through the air like brilliant balls of light burning in the far distance. My writing can be jerky and awkward, synonymous to my enthusiastic, albeit awful, dancing. Words can bubble up from me and pour out in gentle calm, pouring from my hands like they pour from my mouth as I dive under reefs and over arrays of rainbow colored fish. Words can spill out like butter onto an upturned page. They can meld like iron, a steel skin protecting the thin, flimsy paper, simply through the level of force in which my pencil bites down into the paper. In typing, I lose myself: the personality and communication that can be spoken in a gentle curve or a protective slant that some fonts can't express. I see the world full of words, textures, and flavors, that dash and zip in my head. But I can't share that well with others.

So I choose to be messy, to let my lines blur and jangle together in jerky staccato rhythm, or let them flow, elongating a space with tranquility. Now, words can define me, and I share that with others. These words hold me when I cry, dance with me when I sing, and rush with me in a fury when I scream onto a blank page. Their pizzazz, their flair, their connectivity, give them power. But the way words are formed, shaped, and cultivated, carries its own weight. For each word is only as strong as the thought behind it. And when that thought can be shared through any scrap of paper, there's no end to what writing can accomplish.



ESSAY TIPS

- Don't:
 - Lose your authentic voice
 - Take inappropriate risks
 - Draw overly simplistic conclusions
 - Use another college's name
 - Make simple grammatical and spelling errors
- Do:
 - Focus—write about a blade of grass, not a field of grass
 - Start at the end
 - Respond to the prompt
 - Consider your audience
 - Read your essay aloud to someone
 - Be your most genuine and mature self
 - Ask yourself, “What do I want the reader to know about me after reading this essay?”
 - Read a memoir or autobiography



Questions?