



THE COLLEGE SEARCH PROCESS

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A COMPLICATED LANDSCAPE

More choices than
ever before

Increased
competition—more
applications, same
number of spots

Outside pressures,
including rankings
and the national
media

Rising costs

Significant
demographic shifts

Use of large
language models

SCOTUS decision
on race conscious
admissions

Shifting testing
landscape



SO WHAT CAN BE DONE?



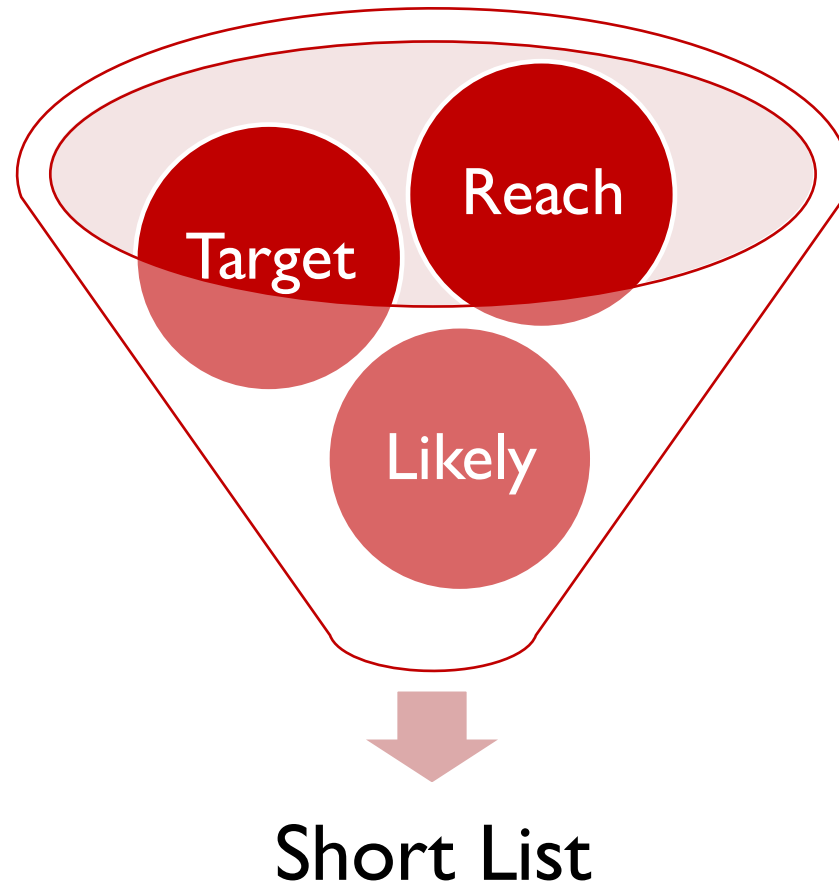
WHERE TO
START



The image shows three large, red, ribbed hot air balloons floating in the sky. They are positioned in the foreground and middle ground, with one balloon slightly higher and further back than the others. Below the balloons is a dense, green landscape filled with various trees, including many palm trees. In the far distance, a city skyline is visible, featuring several golden pagodas and other traditional structures. The sky is a clear, pale blue. A semi-transparent dark rectangle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the text "Start with an open mind" in white, bold, sans-serif font.

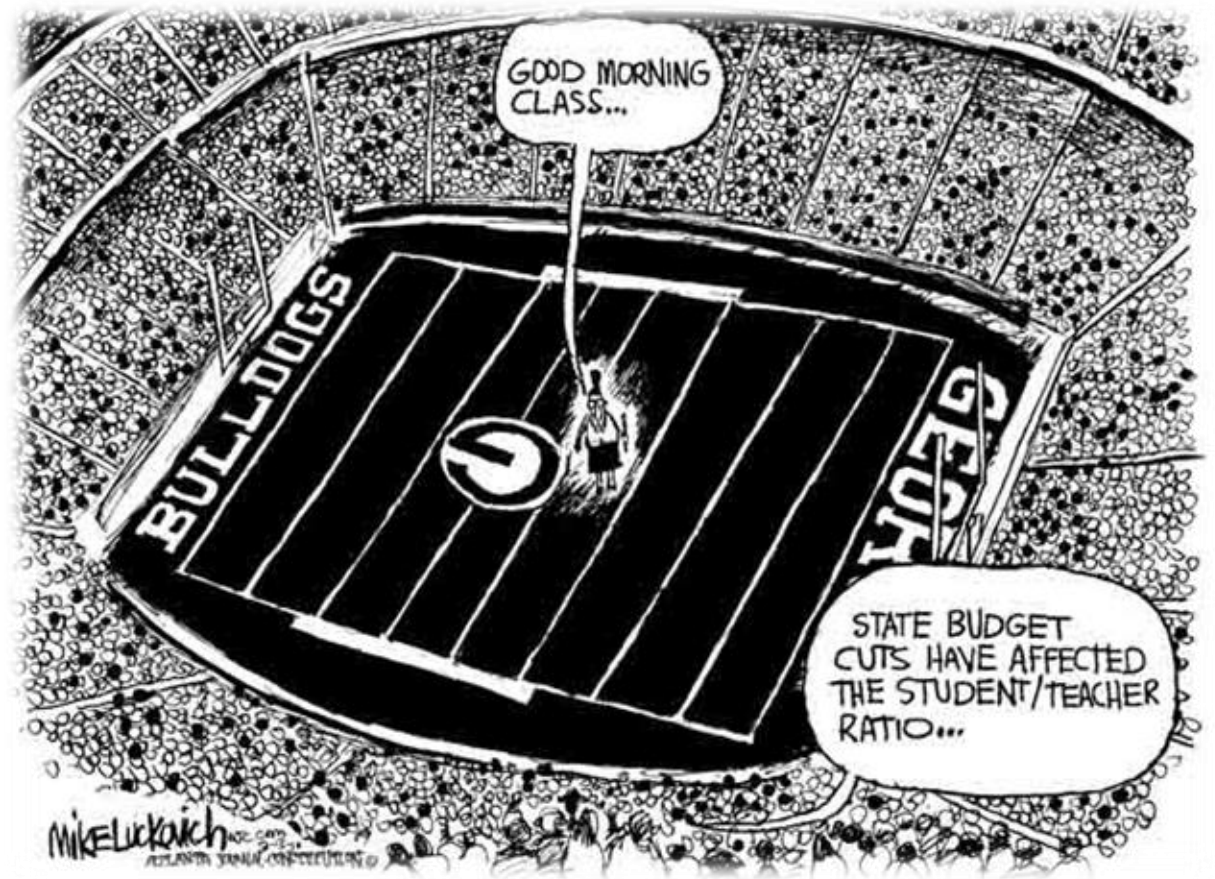
Start with an open mind

RESEARCHING AND NARROWING YOUR LIST



WHERE TO BEGIN

- Start with self-reflection
 - What has been most exciting about your experience in high school?
 - What is your favorite class? What about it do you find most engaging?
 - Considering all that you do both inside and outside of school, what do you really care about?
 - What activities or interests would like to further explore or pursue?
- Plan out your college search
 - Consider how much time you have to begin and complete your search process—map out a timeline
 - Start visiting locally
 - Cast a wide net—resist the notion that there is one perfect college out there
 - Consider the difference between a liberal arts college and a university, between urban and suburban, between large and small campus
- Use your resources and ask questions
- Be open-minded, but also be skeptical
- Design a thoughtful search—employ a system that works for you



An aerial photograph of a large, complex topiary maze. The maze is constructed from dense, green, rounded hedges that form a series of interconnected loops and paths. A prominent spiral path leads towards the center of the maze. The hedges are interspersed with small, bright red flowers, adding a vibrant contrast to the green. The maze is set in a garden with a dark, reflective surface, possibly a pond or a wet lawn, visible between the hedges. The overall scene is well-lit, suggesting a sunny day.

FINDING THE RIGHT FIT...

...OFTEN INVOLVES ASKING THE RIGHT
QUESTIONS.



RESEARCH: ASKING DEEPER QUESTIONS



- Types of research opportunities, internships, community-based projects? When do they start?
- Percentage that study abroad? For how long? On which programs? Credit and financial aid transfer?
- Graduation and retention rates?
- Job and grad school placement? How is it calculated?
- Curricular initiatives? Strategic plan?
- College's five to ten-year building plan?
- Percentage of the budget spent on instruction compared to student services?
- Percentage of students that graduate with debt? Average debt? (Perhaps ask about college's debt—about their bond rating?)
- Institutional priorities (diversity, curriculum, initiatives, etc.)?



DESIGN A THOUGHTFUL VISIT PROCESS



An aerial photograph of a college campus featuring several large, light-colored buildings with multiple windows and a central courtyard. The campus is surrounded by lush green trees. A red semi-transparent banner is positioned at the top of the image, containing the title text. Below the banner, the list of reasons and methods for demonstrating interest is displayed in a clean, sans-serif font.

DEMONSTRATING INTEREST

- 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

CAMPUS VISIT

- Do your research
 - Consider what type of visit might best suit your needs
 - Plan ahead. Avoid being thrown off by the little things (ex. parking issues)
- Register for events in advance
- Take the tour and do the info session
- Try the food
- Break away from the day and meet people
- Come prepared with questions that are best answered on campus





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





DESIGN A THOUGHTFUL APPLICATION PROCESS

THOROUGH RESEARCH LEADS TO A BETTER ESSAY



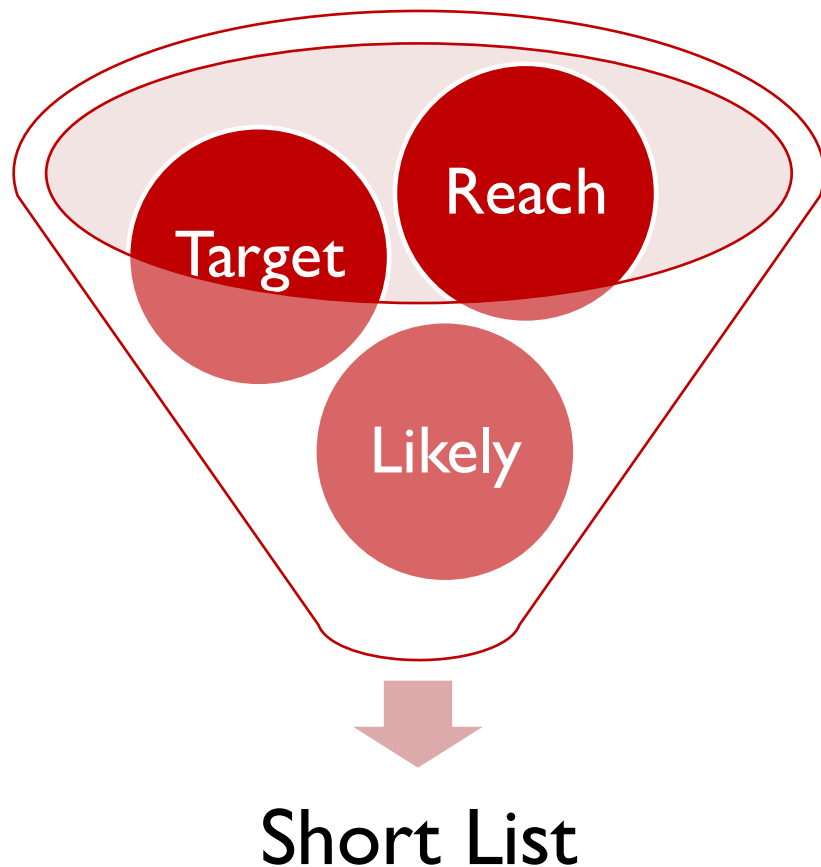
CONSTRUCTING THE APPLICATION

- 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



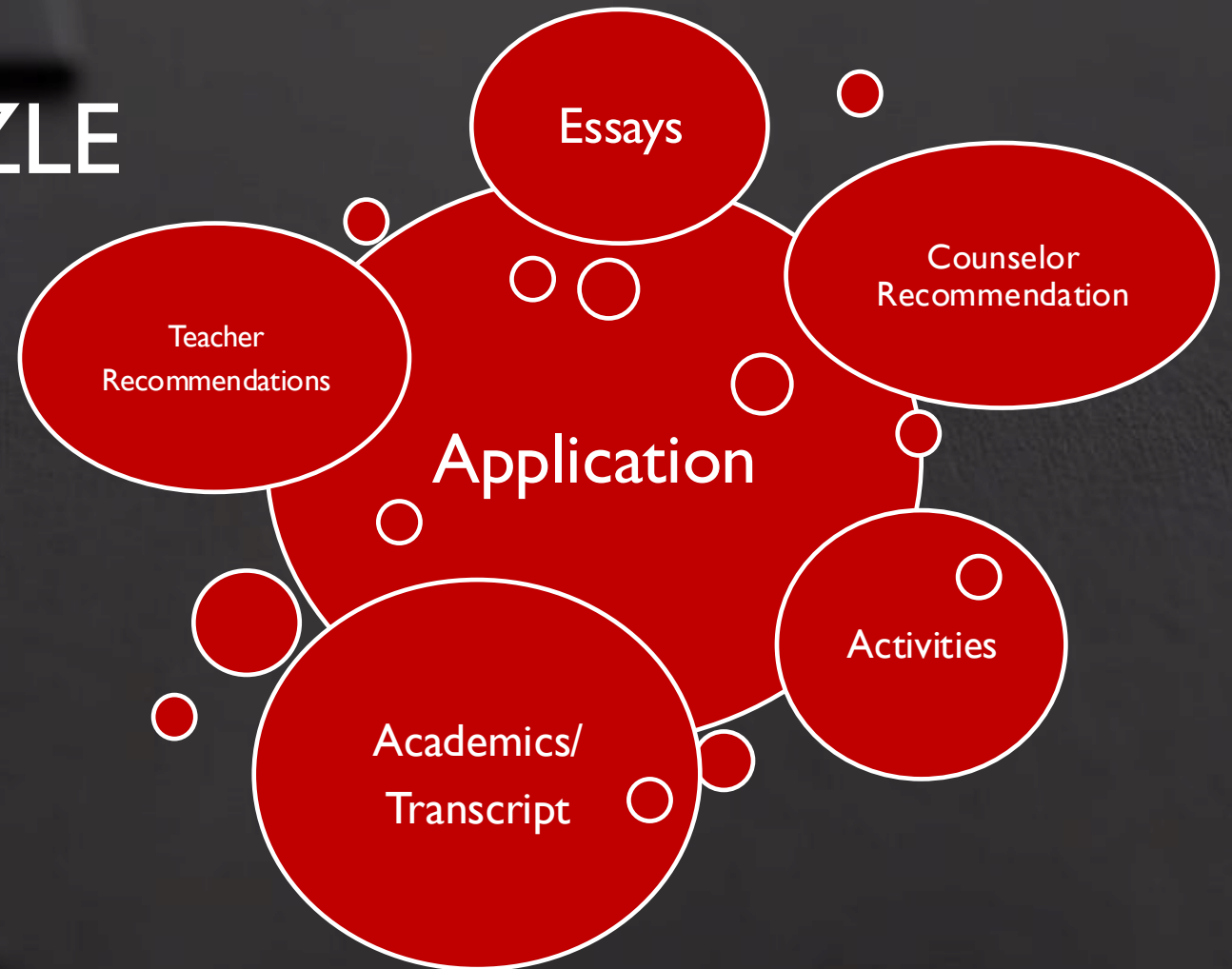
"I want to show my colleges I'm well-rounded, so I wrote a poem in Spanish about how chess club has made me a better quarterback."

DESIGN A THOUGHTFUL SEARCH AND DEMONSTRATION UNDERSTANDING



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

PIECES OF THE PUZZLE





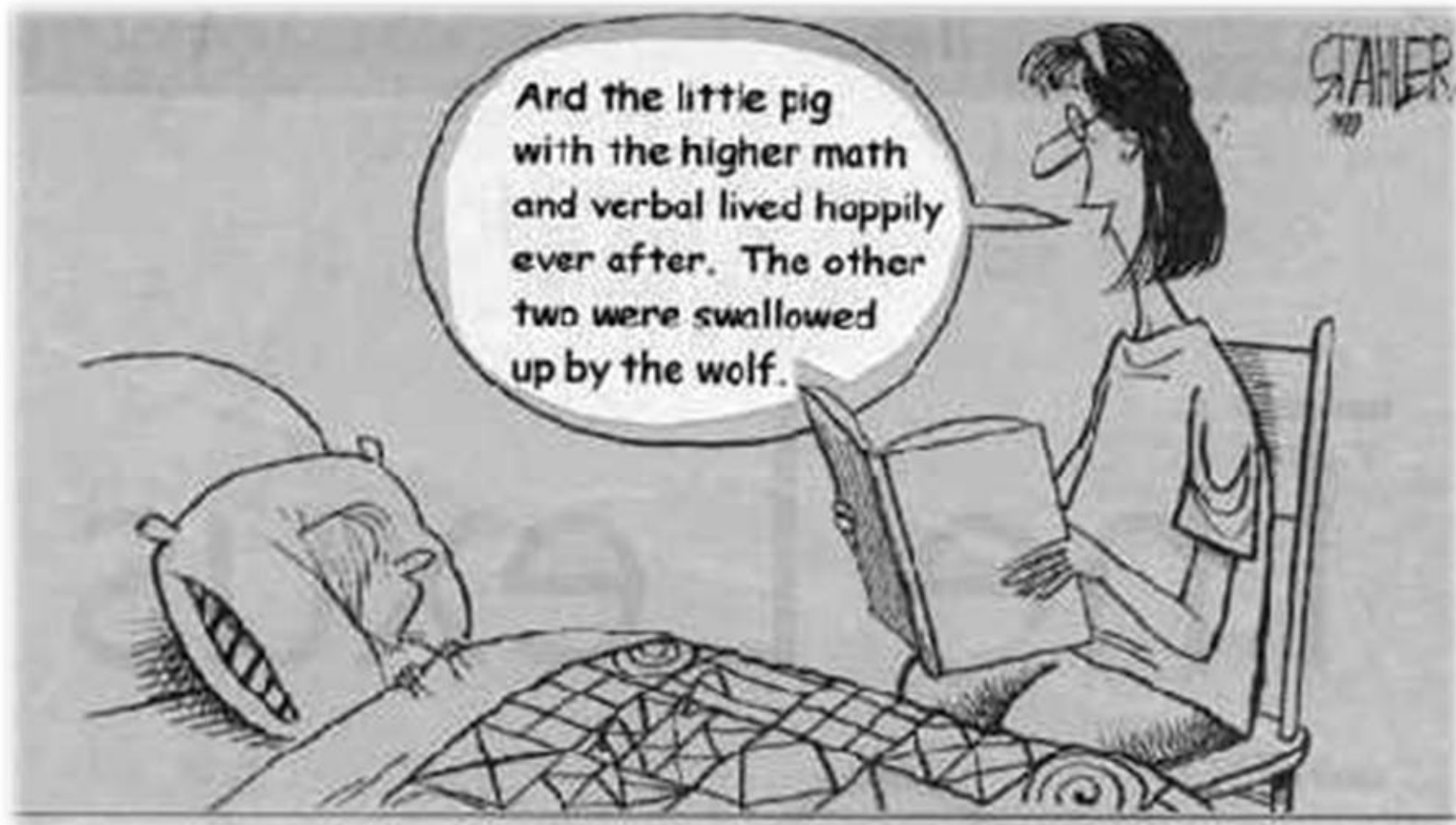
THE APPLICATION PROCESS





"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."

ACADEMICS

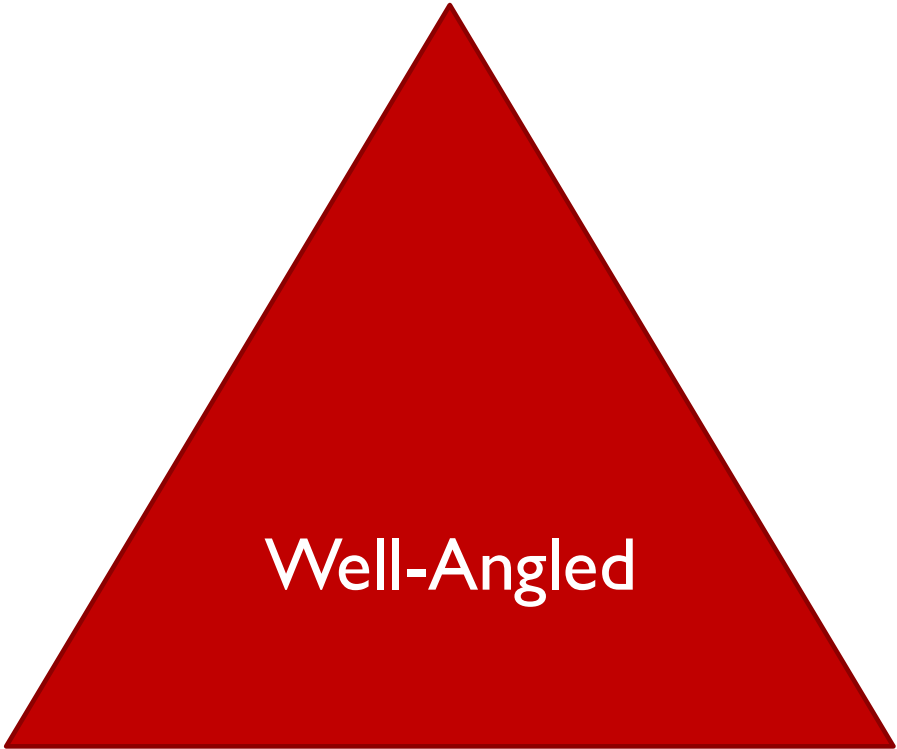


ACTIVITIES AND PASSIONS



"We want you to have fun, as long as it's fun that enhances a college-admission application."

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

A large red equilateral triangle pointing upwards.

Well-Angled

A large red circle.

Well-Rounded

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Are all these recommendation letters
from your mother?

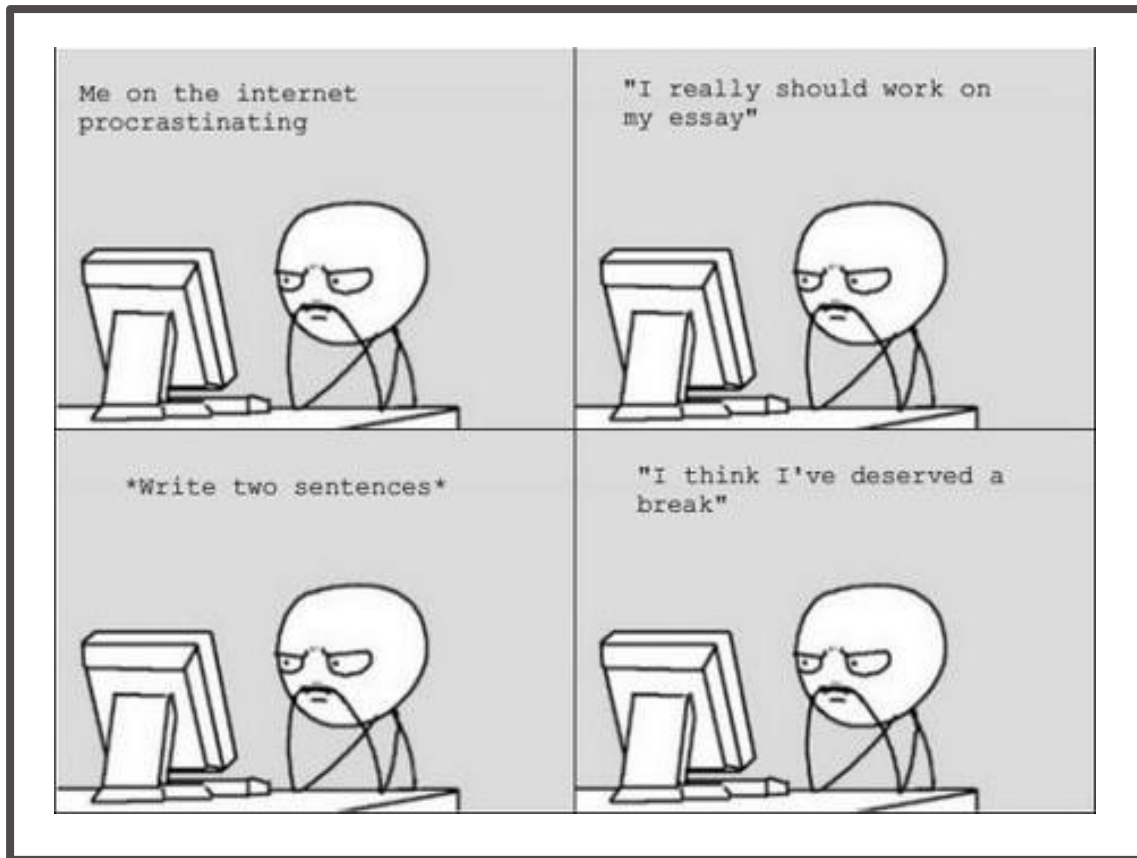




THE ESSAY



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.

ASSESSMENT OF THE ESSAY: THE FOUR C'S

-
- Content/substance
 - Clarity
 - Correctness
 - Creativity



CHOICE OF TOPIC

- The focus should be on you, the student
- Be sure you have evidence/examples to marshal
- 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.

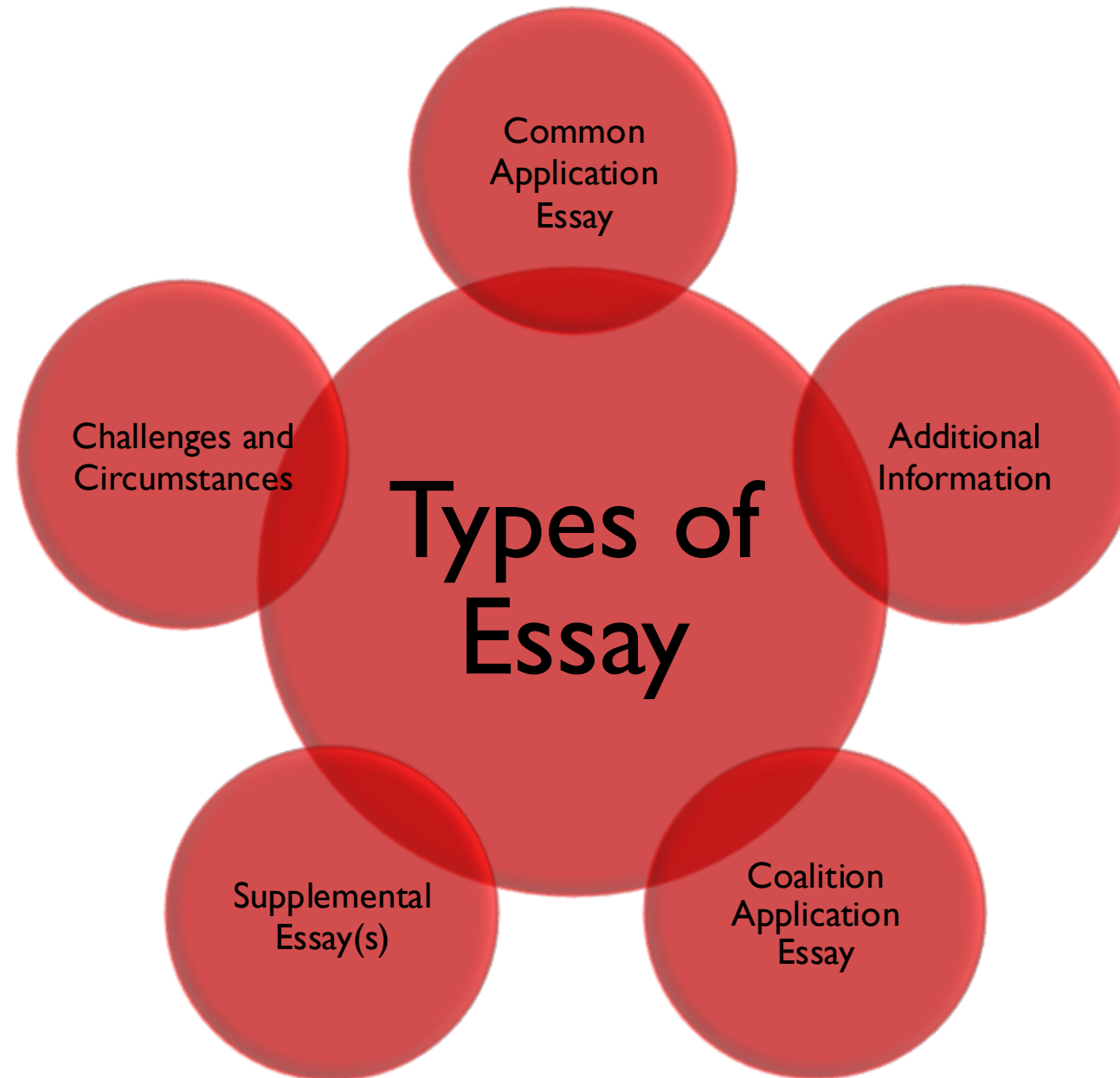
Embracing this new understanding of success led me on a path of self-discovery. I began exploring my passions and talents, seeking opportunities that aligned with my personal values. I shifted my focus from external validation to internal satisfaction, finding joy in pursuing endeavors that brought me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



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

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

THE COMMON APPLICATION

- Through March 1, 2025, 1,390,256 distinct first-year applicants had applied to 863 returning members, an increase of 4% from 1,333,019 in 2023–24.
- Total application volume to returning members through March 1 rose 6% from 2023–24 (8,072,316) to 2024–25 (8,535,903). Applicants were also applying to slightly more members in 2024–25 than in 2023–24 (up 1% from 6.06 to 6.14 applications per applicant).
- Applications to public members (10%) grew at a faster rate than those to private members since 2023–24 (2%). Furthermore, growth in applications was slowest for the most selective institutions (defined as having admit rates below 25%) at 4% and between 6-7% higher for all other selectivity levels.
- Source: <https://www.commonapp.org/files/DAR/deadline-updates/Common-App-Deadline-Updates-2025-03-13.pdf>

First-year application trends through March 1

'24
—
'25

Applications

8,535,903

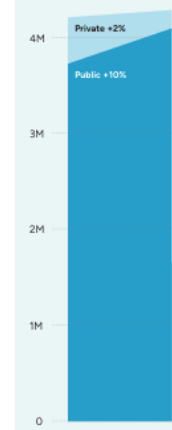
total applications

863

returning members*

Member Type

Applications to public members (10%) grew at a faster rate than those to private members since 2023–24 (2%).



Applicants

1,390,256

applicants

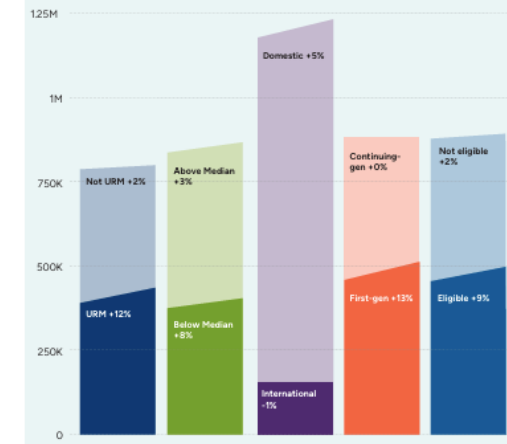
Underrepresented minority race/ethnicity (URM) applicants increased by 12%.

Growth in applicants from below-median income ZIP-codes continued to outpace their peers at 8% since 2023–24.

International applicant growth stagnated, while growth in domestic applicants increased by 5%.

First-generation applicants increased by 13% since 2023–24.

Growth was faster for students reporting eligibility for a Common App fee waiver (9%) compared to those not reporting fee waiver eligibility (2%).



*Institutions who have maintained membership since 2020

Each category shows trends from 2023–24 to 2024–25 season. © Common App 2025



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 are 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



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

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

- Take the lead—evidence of self-management
 - Student-centered process
- Demonstrate your interest
- Find the right fit(s)
 - Colleges are crafting communities of diverse and engaged students
- Build a network of advocates
 - Regional counselor, faculty, coaches, teachers, guidance counselor, administrators, alumni, current students, family, and friends
- Craft a well-organized application that reflects who you are (be your most genuine and mature self)
- Write a thoughtful essay(s)
- Communicating with colleges and representatives
- Celebrate each of your successes





Questions?