

College Essay Tips

College essays are most impactful when they are written as a narrative. A narrative essay is an essay that tells a story. Narratives are often anecdotal, experimental, and personal—allowing students to express themselves in creative and, quite often, moving ways. Most college essay prompts urge personality and reflection.

After reviewing the Common Application Essay prompts for 2019-2020 listed below, you will notice that each question is **best** satisfied with real details (from personal stories) that have affected the applicant in some way:

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.

Tips to remember:

- Follow all the rules listed on the application; you don't want to void your response or irritate the reader.
- You don't have to be a superstar on paper or have visited exotic places in order to write an awesome essay. The best essays answer the prompt by using a common thread to sew together a series of experiences that have led to a lasting impression or "takeaway"—not as advice to the reader but as an impression that has improved the applicant.
- The best essays *show* personality instead of *telling* accomplishments.
- Show, Don't Tell. Consider what it would be like to write a paragraph about your friend Steve who is "funny," but you can't use the adjective "funny" to describe him. This process will force you to tell an anecdote or two to *prove* that your friend is funny. You should use this method throughout your essay so that you don't rely solely on adjectives to prove your point.
- A narrative essay doesn't follow the strict guidelines of an argumentative or research paper—especially in relation to the placement of a thesis statement.

Helpful Formula:

Loosely consider breaking your essay into thirds, each area taking up about 1/3 of your allotted word count.

1. Start off your essay with your source of inspiration—the anecdote or story.
2. Move to your main point. Make the connection for us and integrate relevant anecdotes as you do so.
3. End with your lasting impression. This is where you answer this question craftily:
How do you apply the inspiration you set up in the beginning to the present day;
how does it affect you now?

Do:

- suggest that you value an array of experiences, value learning, notice the little things, can overcome adversity, have initiative, and/or have committed to an activity or an idea.
- stand out by being yourself
- embrace details
- recognize that the word limit means that you have to make a real impression in—on average—just a page.
- use “I” (but try to diversify your sentences so that you *don’t overuse it* or repeat the same, “I believe, I want, I learned...” beginning as overusing “I” may create distance between you and your reader).
- think metaphorically.
- edit, edit, and edit your paper; your form, style, and content
- pick your words and verbs wisely
- avoid clichés

Don’t:

- focus on the experiences already listed on your application
- write an introduction to your introduction. Eliminate the fluff and get right to the story.
- suggest in any way that you’re cynical, likely to turn inward in college, are depressed, are self-destructive, lack integrity, or tend to blame others
- repeat (unless you’re using repetition as a rhetorical device)
- be sarcastic
- pretend to be something you’re not
- stretch the truth
- act like you’re a finished product
- deviate from your main point

Referenced and helpful text, sites, and program:

- *Fiske Real College Essays That Work*, ISBN-10: 1402201648
- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu>
- <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/ss/College-Essay-Style-Tips.htm>
- <http://www.npr.org/series/4538138/this-i-believe>
- <https://www.commonapp.org>
- <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-in/essays>