

## Summer Assignment: College Essay Draft

This summer, along with summer reading, your task will be to write a viable working draft of your college essay. You will be **required** to have a draft for senior retreat. Following retreat, you will receive feedback from your teacher, work in peer groups, and polish your work into a final draft during the first few weeks of the school year. All students, regardless of college plans, will be required to write at least one of these essays. You will receive more information about the assignment in the summer reading letter. Until then, this packet on the essay-writing process will help you get started.

*Try to write your draft with some of these things in mind:*

### **Subject Matter/Purpose:**

- The essay should highlight something about YOU. If you write about a person or book that influenced you, your writing conveys the influence on YOU very clearly (it's not just a great profile of your coach or a glowing review of a novel)

### **An Engaging Opening:**

- Something that catches your attention, or clearly asserts the author's subject matter, tone, or intent
- The essay addresses the topic clearly

### **Unity:**

- The essay addresses one topic—an anecdote, personality trait, etc.—in a way that is easy to follow and does not stray too far from the central theme established in the opening
- There is a natural “arc” to the story, profile, or idea addressed in the essay
- The story moves in a concise manner: extraneous details are left out in order to highlight the core idea

### **Closure:**

- The writer finds a natural point to conclude the essay, often returning to the opening anecdote or idea in a way that demonstrates some personal growth or new insight.
- The reader feels a sense of resolution and clarity when turning away from the essay.

### **Diction:**

- The writer chooses words and phrases that are appropriate to the topic; that is, the language is neither too colloquial nor trying too hard to sound sophisticated
- Colleges want a sense of **you**, a sense of your intellectualism, to see if you can join the community at their institution. Don't use a \$2 word when a simpler one will do, but do demonstrate that you are well-informed by choosing the best word for the idea.
- The writer avoids common clichés
- The language is vivid and draws you as a reader into the story or presents a clear picture of the writer as an individual.
- Go through the essay and look at every time you use the verb TO BE or other vague, tired language like “someone, something, great, very, etc.” Could you make another choice?

### **Tone:**

- The tone is appropriate to the topic
- The writer avoids conveying anger, resentment, arrogance
- The writer is reflective without being overly self-conscious

### **Grammar:**

- There are no major grammatical errors
- The writer has proofread the text for any other minor errors

## 2019-2020 Common Application Essay Prompts

Essays must be between 250 and 650 words.

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. 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 that is 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 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.

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During the 2018-2019 application year, the most popular topic of choice was: "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." (24.1%).

"Through the Common App essay prompts, we want to give all applicants - regardless of background or access to counseling - the opportunity to share their voice with colleges. Every applicant has a unique story. The essay helps bring that story to life," said Meredith Lombardi, Associate Director, Outreach and Education, for The Common Application.

## ***Don't Be Bland, by Bruce Poch***

*Dean of Admissions, Pomona College*

<http://www.newsweek.com/dont-be-bland-108793>

For admissions officers, reviewing applications is like final-exam week for students--except it lasts for months. Great applications tell us we've done our job well, by attracting top-caliber students. But it's challenging to maintain the frenetic pace without forgetting these are all real people with real aspirations--people whose life stories we are here to unravel, if they will let us.

The essay is a key piece of learning those life stories. I live near Los Angeles, where every day screenplays are read without regard for human context. The writer's life and dreams don't matter--all that matters is the writing, the ideas, the end product. On the other hand, in reading essays, context does matter: who wrote this? We are driven to put the jigsaw puzzle together because we think we are building a community, not just choosing neat stories. When I pick up a file, I want to know whether the student has siblings or not, who his parents are, where he went to high school. Then I want the essay to help the rest of the application make sense, to humanize all the numbers that flow past. I am looking for insight.

A brilliantly written essay may compel me to look beyond superficial shortcomings in an application. But if no recommendation or grade or test score hints at such writing talent, I may succumb to cynicism and assume the writer had help--maybe too much. In the worst cases, I may find that I have read it before--with name and place changed--on the Internet, in an essay-editing service or a "best essays" book.

The most appealing essays take the opportunity to show a voice not rendered homogeneous and pasteurized. But sometimes the essays tell us too much. Pomona offers this instruction with one essay option: "We realize that not everything done in life is about getting into college. Tell us about something you did that was just plain fun." One student grimly reported that nothing was fun because in his family everything was about getting into college. Every activity, course choice and spare moment. It did spark our sympathy, but it almost led to a call to Child Protective Services as well.

Perfection isn't required. We have seen phenomenal errors in essays that haven't damaged a student at all. I recall a student who wrote of the July 1969 lunar landing of--I kid you not--Louis Armstrong. I read on, shaking my head. This student was great--a jazz trumpeter who longed to study astronomy. It was a classic slip and perhaps a hurried merging of two personal heroes. He was offered admission, graduated and went on for a Ph.D. in astrophysics. He may not have been as memorable if he had named "Neil" instead of "Louis" in his essay's opening line. Hey, we're human, too.

An essay that is rough around the edges may still be compelling. Good ideas make an impression, even when expressed with bad punctuation and spelling errors. Energy and excitement can be communicated. I'm not suggesting the "I came, I saw, I conquered" approach to essay writing, nor the "I saved the world" angle taken by some students who write about community-service projects. I'm talking about smaller moments that are well captured. Essays don't require the life tragedy that so many seem to think is necessary. Not all admission offers come out of sympathy!

Admissions officers, even at the most selective institutions, really aren't looking for perfection in 17- and 18-year-olds. We are looking for the human being behind the roster of activities and grades. We are looking for those who can let down their guard just a bit to allow others in. We are looking for people whose egos won't get in the way of learning, students whose investment in ideas and words tells us--in the context of their records--that they are aware of a world beyond their own homes, schools, grades and scores. A picture, they say, is worth a thousand words. To us, an essay that reveals a student's unaltered voice is worth much, much more.

## College-Essay Starter

### Created by Stephanie Lipkowitz

To generate ideas for your essay, jot down notes, sentences, thoughts, and insights in response to the following questions. Within one of these lies the seed to your college essay topic. The full range of answers constitutes your own profile, your sense of who you are and what you see for yourself as possibilities for the future.

- **Strengths:**

Things I Do Well in School:

Things I Do Well Outside of School:

- **Areas Needing Improvement:**

Things or Kinds of Things I'm Not So Good At:

- **Interests:**

Kinds of Recreation/Entertainment I Enjoy:

Areas of Knowledge I'm Interested In:

- **People who have shaped/influenced me (real / fictional / known / not known)**

List the people who feel very important in the sense that they have helped you to become the person you are or the person you might become. Add some notes as to why.

- **Seminal Experiences**

List the Academic Experiences that stand out over the years as extremely important to you—they may not be “big” but they may have given you some kind of important moment or confirmed something for you.

List the non-academic experiences that stand out over the years as extremely important to you

- **What makes you most worried about writing the college essay?**

- **What are the two traits you would most want the admissions committee to know about you as a person?**

**If you're stuck and not getting anywhere with the conventional questions, here are some other places to start.**

- Tell the story of your name.
- Write down five adjectives about you. Then connect them (singly or together) to a specific anecdote that displays those adjective in action. Narrow down as needed.
- List your three favorite foods (be specific—not just cereal, but “Cap’n Crunch before it gets soggy”).
- List your top five favorite places. They can be exotic or local—Caffe Sant’Eustachio in Rome or Satellite coffee shop in Albuquerque, Disneyland or the seals at Rio Grande Zoo, Mt. Rainier or La Luz trail, the living room floor.
- List five things you’ve accomplished in your life that you’re really proud of.
- Look in your backpack or purse. List and briefly describe some of the things that are in there. Imagine this wasn’t your backpack, but a stranger’s. What would you deduce about this person based on some of the items in the backpack or purse?
- When was the last time you laughed so hard something came out of your nose? Tell the story of what happened.

**If you’re stuck, here are some creative prompts used by schools like University of Chicago, USC, etc.**

- If you could balance on a tightrope, over what landscape would you walk? (No net.)
- In his autobiography *A Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela writes, “There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.” Tell us about an unchanging place to which you have returned. In what way has the place never changed? How does its constancy reveal changes in you?
- Name a favorite book or movie that you are reluctant to admit you like. Briefly explain why.
- A catchphrase is a pithy statement strongly associated with a real or fictional person, from George Washington’s “I cannot tell a lie” to Homer Simpson’s “D’oh!” Tell us a phrase with which you are already associated or create a new catchphrase of your own.
- It is common knowledge that Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. What most people don’t know is that he tried over 6,000 times before succeeding. Reflect on an accomplishment you achieved in an unlikely way.
- Newton’s First Law of Motion states that an object in motion tends to stay in motion in the same direction unless acted upon by an external force. Tell us about an external influence (a person, an event, etc.) that affected you and how it caused you to change direction.
- There is a Quaker saying: “Let your life speak.” Describe the environment in which you were raised—your family, home, neighborhood, or community—and how it influenced the person you are today.
- Mahatma Gandhi said, “We must become the change we want to see in the world.” Reflect on your world and your place within it. Discuss how you have changed or plan to effect change within that world.

**ACADEMY COLLEGE-ESSAY EXAMPLE 1**

[565 WORDS (written when length requirement was different)]

I first saw some hair slither down the drain when I was thirteen. I thought nothing of it. And then, as I studied meticulously through the night, I began to notice that whenever I scratched my head, hair would sprinkle lightly over the white pages of my textbook. Still, I paid it little heed. It wasn't until I was fifteen when I realized, as I examined myself in the mirror, that my hairline was without a doubt receding. I was going bald!

I told no one. The shame was tremendous. I feared my friends would leave me, my invisible girlfriend would never materialize, and I would utterly fail at life. So I kept it secret. Absolutely no one was to find out. Even though I was only just beginning to lose hair, my precautions were at times severe. Once, I even tried to marker-in the receding parts. I admit it was excessive, but I couldn't let my secret out.

However, as the "condition" progressed, it became harder to conceal. The thing I hated most about high school was that I wasn't allowed to wear a hat inside. I even considered approaching the administration, hoping there could be a special exemption for my particular predicament. Inevitably, people began to catch on. "Hey, shouldn't you have more hair?" they would say, and I would have to come up with some ludicrous excuse like, "Oh yes, I accidentally spilled some bleach on my head while doing the laundry." Which is ridiculous because I never do the laundry.

I knew there had to be some kind of solution. I went to doctors, saw dermatologists; I even asked my orthodontist if it could be a dental issue. They all assured me it was genetic male pattern balding. So, I did everything else I could to combat the problem. Along with several ill-conceived home remedies, I began taking vitamins and using special shampoos from India. I even tried Rogaine. I had to stop, though, because it made my heart beat so fast I couldn't focus in class. All of my attempts in vain, I had to survive high school with my "condition."

High school was not invented with balding sixteen year olds in mind. I was mortified about my appearance. Every time I turned around, I feared someone was snickering behind my back. So initially, I honed my defense: comedic self-deprecation. I decided not only to acknowledge that I was balding, but also to embrace the fact. Because I was able to laugh at myself, I became impervious to any frivolous ridicule. My lack of hair follicles became the center of a joke, rather than the object of my shame. I managed to turn my predicament into a source of joy by accepting it as part of who I am.

Some people may have gargantuan freckles, or unseemly large Dumbo ears, or no hair by the time the diplomas are handed out. However, it's these little differences that give us the opportunity to determine our character. I actually became more self-confident, witty, and outgoing because of my hair loss, not in spite of it. It gave me the opportunity to choose between two different strokes of life: one of shame and denial, another of confidence and acceptance. I'm glad I chose the latter. In any case, Socrates was bald and turned out okay -apart from being sentenced to death of course.

## COLLEGE-ESSAY EXAMPLE 2

[687 WORDS]

Walk into a typical debate round at a national tournament and you'll hear people speaking so fast you'll wonder how (or at least why) they do it and who can understand them. What sounds like a high-pitched wail probably contains something like, "On to the k flow. The 2NC drops three args on 2AC 4, Floating PICs. A – Non-reciprocal infinite ground loss – Their interp allows the neg to suck up all of case and all turns on the kritik. C – Worse than aff conditionality because they're an unpredictable, non-text-based advocacy switch and E – Education – Destroys depth of argumentation about the alternative. Now, the impacts to any of these are voters because of irrevocable 2AC strategy skew and for precedent..."

Though most sensible people would slowly back out of the room, muttering under their breath about what kind of lunatic would talk like that, this esoteric jargon intrigues me. While I enjoy writing for my school and city papers and although I had a great experience in a community service class and later on the Community Builders board, debate is the extra-curricular activity that has had the biggest impact on me.

I joined debate in eighth grade, at my brother's suggestion. He had done wonderfully at debate (third in the nation his senior year) and assured me that I would enjoy it. I was initially skeptical, but as I learned more and more about debate, I discovered that it was nothing like what I had expected. It was much cooler. I got so excited my first year that my coach worried that I would burn out by my junior year. That summer I went to my first debate camp, and in the following years I journeyed to competitions across the U.S., including tournaments for national champions. Eight to ten times per year I would spend four or five days in another state, debating the best teams in the country (and actually beating a few of them).

One of the few things I enjoy more than debating is judging debates. The three tournaments at which I have judged have given me insight into what it's like on the other side of the room. Judging has forced me to grudgingly acknowledge that there can be many ways to decide rounds, particularly the good ones. The judge is the only person in the round who listens to everything and thus, much of the time when a debater disagrees with a judge's decision, the debater is missing something. Having been a few speaker points away from elimination rounds at four consecutive national tournaments, I found this difficult to accept until I sat there with the ballots myself.

As I met more and more debaters I discovered that debate provided an instant topic of conversation. I could always talk with debaters about their new arguments, their prior debates and the teams they had debated.

I also slowly discovered that, while debate is highly specialized, its general skills help a lot in other areas. I found I could research topics far more efficiently and process information much more quickly. I could defend either side of an argument and use my knowledge of philosophy and political concepts like federalism and political capital.

Debate provided other advantages. I got to travel all over the country. Though I rarely had time to see the cities themselves, I gained intimate knowledge of the security lines at DFW, Logan, LAX, Atlanta, Phoenix, Oakland and a few other airports. Hefting four full tubs of evidence provided good exercise. (Well, maybe not, but I'd like to think so.) I got great preparation for the crowded dorm life of college by sharing a cramped one-bed hotel room with four other guys. I learned how to operate on very little sleep. Perhaps most importantly, I learned that when in Boston in February in the middle of the biggest snowstorm of the year, it is not a good idea to touch a solid metal dolly with bare, wet hands.

In short, debate proved to be not only fun, but useful as well. I look forward to four more years of my favorite extra-curricular activity.

### COLLEGE-ESSAY EXAMPLE 3

[537 WORDS (written when length requirement was different)]

The sting of her hand still resonating on my cold cheek, I stared at her bleary eyed and cried, "You're so ... *Ugh... so stupid*" That's not what I meant to say. I meant to say, "sometimes you overanalyze and place some sort of importance on my inadvertent tendency to glance at passersby during our in depth discussions. Even though I am completely enamored of you, peripheral movement sometimes attracts my eye. It stems not from any disinterest in you, but merely from a natural curiosity about my surroundings." Unfortunately, the ugly sentence that spewed from my mouth caused her to storm off to her car and recklessly speed out of the parking lot. Why'd I say that? I wasn't just acting on some unhampered fury: I didn't know *how* to say what I felt. I still didn't know how to voice what I was feeling until I spent an hour obsessing over it during English class, as I feverishly tore through my vocabulary book trying to find the word to sum her up, something other than "stupid," of course.

I know it isn't just my problem. Everyone suffers from some sort of, what I like to call *Inarticulitis* – the inability to accurately convey their feelings, simply because they don't know enough words. Perhaps it's a function of our society; have you ever noticed how everything with some appeal to it falls under the ever-expanding umbrella of "cool," whether it be a heart-wrenching movie, an elegant dance, or a vivid picture? Or how every human being is casually reduced to "dude"? Clearly, these conventions usually don't cause problems, but they cause us to drift further and further apart, separated by, if anything else, a lack of vocabulary.

So, I would recommend that my sibling (if I had one) read the dictionary.

"The *dictionary*?!" he might say. "How dry! How emotionless!"

"Sure," I'd respond. "But the point is, while we can feel emotion, we cannot communicate it with any degree of precision unless we have the requisite words to do so. And look on the bright side. It's long; unlike some other books that you could finish in two or three days, this will take a month to complete. It's structured in short, detached intervals; you can open it to any page and start reading, which means you can read it for any period of time, without worrying you'll miss part of the story. And, you won't even need to keep track of that pesky bookmark! The dictionary heaves with information; every time you pick it up, you will discover a new word, or, at the very least, refine your understanding of an old one.

"While watching movies and playing computer games might entertain you for a few hours, building yourself a new lexicon will benefit you throughout your life. With the power of words, you can better articulate your own thoughts, as well as comprehend the thoughts of others. This, in turn, fosters sound, intimate relationships because the parties appreciate each other.

"So, brother," I'd say, "by realizing the value of the English language, you can avoid falling victim to this plague of *Inarticulitis*, and, when the time comes, you won't have to call your girlfriend 'stupid'."



**COLLEGE-ESSAY EXAMPLE 4**  
[646 WORDS]

Link

I was born to a 6-foot-2 Jewish Cardiologist and a 5-foot tall Mexican nurse. I popped out twice as dark as anyone in my dad's family and much taller than any of the women in my mother's. I was immediately a blend of two cultures, of two different worlds. My mom is the oldest of five, born to a single mother trying to make ends meet. My dad was born to two wealthy Jews from the East Coast.

I became the sole connection between my two cultures, the mediator between my Jewish nana and my devout Christian *abuela*, one who demanded I become a Bat Mitzvah and the other who forced me to go to church with her before my Hebrew lessons each Sunday. I was the single being who had to defend myself when (to the immense dismay of my Cantor) I accidentally wore my cross necklace to our Hebrew lesson.

When I got my first real job, as a hostess at a local restaurant, the head chef was impressed when I effortlessly responded to him in Spanish. Like so many others, he asked how I learned and I said I was Mexican, his immediate next question was, "what's your last name?". When I told him, he looked at me like I was speaking a completely different language than the *patois* of kitchen Spanish we were communicating in.

Every Sunday, I would go to breakfast with my dad's entire family at my grandparent's home and then my mom would pick me up and we would hurry to visit my grandpa at the trailer park where he lives. In the span of a day I would visit half of my family in the nicest parts of town and just a few hours later I would be on Zuni St. where my mom wouldn't let my sister and me walk without her.

At large family gatherings I mediated conversations between my older cousins who were trying to decide what college they would go to and my cousins from the other side of my family who were studying to get their GED's. With half of them I was proving myself; showing them that I could accomplish as much as they had. With the other half, I felt guilty. Guilty that I was able to leave, that I was accomplishing so much. That I was able to look at schools far from home and that I was leaving them all behind in Albuquerque.

When I was accepted at Albuquerque Academy, my conscience was consumed with fear; I was scared to tell my older brother, wondering how he would react. I had no idea whether he would be happy for me or if he would spite me. His father left, when he was two and my mom was nineteen, because he didn't want a son with Spina Bifida. My brother never had the opportunities I did but still, that was the first time in my life that I heard my brother cry. He cried because of how proud he was. In that moment, I realized that none of my family was mad at me for being different.

They celebrated me being a mixture of them, being the connection of their cultures. Although at times it has been difficult to try and live as a piece of both worlds, as I've gotten older I've become thankful for this opportunity rather than feeling vindictive towards it. I am grateful that my *tía* taught me to make tamales and that my papa helped me learn to read and interpret my torah portion for my Bat Mitzvah. I have connected these amazing people in my life and I am not only a great representation of both of my cultures, but of both my families and their completely different histories. This has become my story, and my life. *And* I have become the link.