

HOW TO ANSWER THE NEW U.C. APPLICATION PROMPTS

COURSE GUIDE



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UC PERSONAL INSIGHT QUESTIONS

**For UC (public) schools. Choose four prompts.
350 words each, strict limit.**

1. Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.
2. Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.
3. What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?
4. Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.
5. Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?
6. Describe your favorite academic subject and explain how it has influenced you.
7. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?
8. What is the one thing that you think sets you apart from other candidates applying to the Univ. of California?

SESSION 1

HOW TO FIND YOUR FOUR UC TOPICS

The 14 Elements of Comprehensive Review: What You Need to Know

The first thing you need to know about the UC personal insight questions is that they are tied to the 14 elements of comprehensive review. You can find these [here](#), or [here](#):

The 14 Factors of Comprehensive Review for the UC system are...

1. Grade-point average
2. Test scores
3. Performance in and number of courses beyond minimum a-g requirements
4. UC-approved honors courses and advanced courses
5. Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC) – CA residents only
6. Quality of senior-year program of study
7. Academic opportunities in California high schools
8. Outstanding performance in one or more academic subject areas
9. Achievements in special projects
10. Improvement in academic performance
11. Special talents, achievements and awards
12. Participation in educational preparation programs
13. Academic accomplishment in light of life experiences
14. Geographic location

Note: No single factor determines admission, as your application is evaluated holistically.

These are the 14 criteria that UC readers use to determine whether you're in or out.

First, we'll take a look at each element and I'll offer tips to help you make sure you don't leave money on the table--in other words, that any interesting, important contextual information that could set you apart from other UC applicants makes it into your application.

Then, I'll help you find your topics.

Finally, I'll give you two ideas for how to structure your essays.

A Brief Look at the 14 Elements of Comprehensive Review

Here are the elements on which you'll be evaluated, and some points to consider for each:

1. Academic grade point average in all completed "a-g" courses, including additional points for completed UC-certified honors courses.

Your grades are the most important thing the UCs consider when it comes to your application. Note that:

Your grades are self-reported (i.e. - you type them in; you're not mailing in any hard copy material at this time). But definitely be honest. If you're accepted, but get caught falsifying your transcript, your acceptance could be rescinded. (Plus, how embarrassing would that be?)

Pro Tip: Don't try and guess. Only fill this out with an official copy of your transcript in front of you. It's not worth the risk putting a B when you actually got a C.

You need a minimum of 15 college-preparatory (a-g) courses, with at least 11 finished prior to the beginning of your senior year. This is on the UC website (click here), so I won't spend a ton of time on this, but basically the 15 courses are:

- a. History/social science: 2 years
- b. English: 4 years
- c. Mathematics: 3 years
- d. Laboratory science: 2 years
- e. Language other than English: 2 years (or equivalent to the 2nd level of high school instruction)
- f. Visual and performing arts: 1 year
- g. College-preparatory elective (chosen from the subjects listed above or another course approved by the university)

To qualify for the UCs, you need a GPA of 3.0 or better (3.4 if you're a nonresident) in these courses with no grade lower than a C.

You're also evaluated on your:

2. Scores on the following tests: ACT with Writing or the SAT Reasoning Test.

And you may or may not know that:

UCs do not superscore (i.e. take best score from different sections on different days); all scores have to be from one ACT or SAT sitting.

Although some private schools don't like to see you've taken the ACT/SAT a bajillion times, to the UCs it matters less how many times you've taken the tests; they're looking for your best score from one sitting.

3. Number of, content of and performance in academic courses beyond the minimum "a-g" requirements.

In a way, this is pretty straightforward--these are the classes besides those mentioned above--and you're being evaluated based on a) the content of those courses and b) your performance (i.e. your grades).

Tip for how to stand out: If the content and performance aren't crystal clear from your transcript, you can use your "additional info" section to clarify.

Here's what I mean: Let's say the course you took required you to write six 10-page papers over the semester, required a college-level final and was widely considered the most difficult class at your school, striking fear into the hearts of those

daring to take it on. And you got a C+ in the class, though the rest of your transcript boasts As. You might consider (very briefly) providing this context in the Additional Info section. I'm talking like 1-2 sentences here.

Or let's say you were in the hospital with appendicitis for a month and a half and that's why the C+. Put it in there.

Why do this? That C+ could be considered a red flag--in other words, it might raise questions. Make sure you explain it.

4. Number of and performance in UC-approved honors, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate Higher Level and transferable college courses.

Again, pretty straightforward: How many AP, IB, and honors courses have you taken? Also, did you take any courses at a local community college (or university), or any online courses? Make sure you list these.

And if you don't have any, it's okay. Really. Say in the Additional Info section, "My school doesn't have AP classes" or "I have no community college near me, but I have taken the most difficult classes at my school" (for example). This may be in the school report the UCs have, but it may not be, so it doesn't hurt to clarify.

5. Identification by UC as being ranked in the top 9 percent of your high school class at the end of your junior year (Eligible in the Local Context, or ELC).

Do you live in California? Did you graduate in the top 9% of your class with a GPA above 3.0? Have you completed your A-G requirements? If so, you're guaranteed acceptance to a UC. Click here for more info.

6. Quality of your senior-year program as measured by the type and number of academic courses in progress or planned.

Even though the UCs won't use your senior-year grades to determine your acceptance, you will report your 12th grade classes and the UCs want to know that you'll continue to challenge yourself--that you're not just hoping to sail through 12th grade with easy classes.

Basically: Are you taking a senior-year course load that is as challenging as or more challenging than your junior year schedule?

7. Quality of your academic performance relative to the educational opportunities available in your high school.

Not all high schools are created equal. Some schools offer just a few advanced (AP, IB, Honors) courses, and some offer a TON. What percentage of these are you taking?

Here's a key question (for your whole application, really):

Did you make the most of the opportunities available to you?

Examples:

- *You took the most rigorous course-load (i.e. toughest courses) available to you.
- *When a particular advanced course wasn't available at your school, you sought out an opportunity to take this course at another school or local community college.
- *Did you develop an independent study to take a particular course you're passionate about?

These are all worth mentioning in your Additional Info section.

Tip: Although the UC readers often have some good information on California high schools, the reader may not know that, for example a) a particular class on your transcript is selective and only 10% of your Senior class can take this course, or b) you

couldn't take a particular course because of the way your school structures its academic schedule, or c) (heads-up international students) your high school is the #1 most rigorous school in your country.

These are things you may want to mention in your Additional Info section.

Another tip: you could use the fourth prompt, which addresses how you've "worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced," but only do so if you feel like your story warrants 350 words. If not, just do a quick 1-2 sentence explanation, then write about something else for your fourth response.

8. Outstanding performance in one or more specific subject areas.

Here's where your 350-word responses can help. Are you the top student in your AP-Calc AB class--so much so that your teacher made you a teaching assistant in the class, and you tutor other students? Or did you take your study of science to the next level by taking an online course in Genetics with a Duke professor and then applying for and completing an internship over the summer at a local university? All these would be considered "outstanding performance" in a subject area. We'll look at some examples of these when I break down the individual prompts.

9. Outstanding work in one or more special projects in any academic field of study.

The terms "special project" is somewhat flexible here and might include:

- *Performing on Broadway in the National Shakespeare Monologue Competition
- *Participating in a real-world research study on how sleep affects the brain (and maybe even getting published)
- *Designing a free app to help students study for APUSH and getting 10K downloads on iTunes

10. Recent, marked improvement in academic performance as demonstrated by academic GPA and the quality of coursework completed or in progress.

Were your grades terrible in 9th or 10th grade? Did they go up in 11th grade? Why? What wasn't working in 9th-10th grade? What did you do differently? What has changed for you as a result--not just in terms of your grades, but in your approach to academics, or life? Again, something that's a great topic for one of the personal insight questions and something we'll look at more closely when we discuss the individual prompts.

11. Special talents, achievements and awards in a particular field, such as visual and performing arts, communication or athletic endeavors; special skills, such as demonstrated written and oral proficiency in other languages; special interests, such as intensive study and exploration of other cultures; experiences that demonstrate unusual promise for leadership, such as significant community service or significant participation in student government; or other significant experiences or achievements that demonstrate the student's promise for contributing to the intellectual vitality of a campus.

This one is incredibly open, and one we'll spend a good deal of time discussing later. Essentially: what else are you good at?

- *Did you spend months studying constructed languages on your own, and even invent one?
- *Did you turn hikes with your Boy Scout troupe into historical odysseys?
- *Or did you work to resolve racial tension at your school in a really interesting way?

Write about it! And you can see examples of all these later in this guide and course.

12. Completion of special projects undertaken in the context of your high school curriculum or in conjunction with special school events, projects or programs.

This overlaps a little with 9 and 11, but here are a few more examples:

- *Did you write an IB Extended Essay on frog mating habits?
- *Did you create a fundraiser to save your school's Book Club?
- *Create a blog based on interviews you did with CEOs in your community?

13. Academic accomplishments in light of your life experiences and special circumstances, including but not limited to: disabilities, low family income, first generation to attend college, need to work, disadvantaged social or educational environment, difficult personal and family situations or circumstances, refugee status or veteran status.

Were any of the circumstances mentioned above a part of your high school experience? If so, how did they affect you?

Examples:

- *Your school transportation is the city bus service and it's not safe to be out on the streets in your neighborhood after dark, so you didn't participate in too many extracurricular activities.
- *Your family lost its house when you were a freshman, so you took on jobs in cafes and restaurants to help the family make ends meet--and you still found time for a few extracurriculars!
- *Your father has had three surgeries and is unable to work, your mother was deported two years ago and doesn't live here, and you have had to be the mother for your younger brother, cooking for him and your father and doing all the grocery cleaning and shopping... but you've still managed to have perfect attendance.

Any of these could be addressed in the "educational barriers" or "significant challenge" 350-word statements or, briefly, in a few sentences in the Additional Info section.

14. Location of your secondary school and residence.

Not something you have much control over, but essentially if your home or school is in an underserved area, you may have had to deal with increased challenges to access your education. If not, don't worry about it. And this will be something the UCs have information on, but if there are particulars you feel the UCs may not have info on, clarify in very brief terms on the Additional Info section.

Okay, that's that for now.

Time to brainstorm some potential topics.

And what's the best way? I recommend creating your UC Activities List (since you'll need it for your application anyway). And, if you've completed your pre-work for the course—that's already done! If you haven't, [click here to complete it now](http://tinyurl.com/UCprework), or type into your browser "<http://tinyurl.com/UCprework>"

Yes, do this before moving on.

The “How Do I Lead?” Exercise

How it works: Name four ways you’re a leader in your school, home, or community:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Some possibilities to consider:

1. **You hold or held a role with an impressive title** (Example: You were President or VP of something).
2. **You started something** (a club, non-profit, etc.). Bonus points if you started/founded something in response to a need you saw--either locally or abroad.

But there are many other ways to lead! Less obvious examples include:

3. **You were the key decision-maker on a particular project.** You don’t have to be President to lead!
 - a. Ask yourself: What projects have I been involved in that would have had turned out very different without me?
 - b. Maybe, for example: You were the layouts editor for your yearbook. Sure, you weren’t the Editor in Chief, but you did decide what went where and it took a ton of work.
 - c. Or maybe: You helped draft the school’s student constitution
4. **You held more responsibility than others on a particular task.**
 - a. Were you in charge of the volunteers for Cesar Chavez Day?
 - b. Are you responsible for counting the money at your job?
5. **[What other leadership qualifications can you think of?]** Write your answer here:

The “Four Ways I’ve Been Challenged in My Life” Exercise

How it works: Name four ways you’ve been challenged and an impact you experienced as a result of each.

Example: Both my parents worked full-time, which meant I had to watch my little sister (challenge), making it difficult for me to participate in extracurricular activities (impact).

CHALLENGE	IMPACT
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	

Here are some challenges you might consider writing about:

- * Single-parent household
- * Significant work hours while in high school, particularly if you contributed to family income to help pay bills
- * Low income family or large family with many dependents
- * You’re the first person in your family to attend college
- * Parents’ disability or unemployment (specify what and how long)
- * Any physical or learning disabilities (diagnosed by a health professional; specify what and how long)
- * Language spoken at home other than English, or any portion of your high school career that was taken outside of the U.S.
- * Unable to take specific classes at your school (APs, Honors)
- * Health issues you’ve faced that have impacted your academic performance or ability to participate in extracurricular activities (diagnosed by a health professional; specify what and how long)
- * Travel challenges (you lived too far away from school to participate in extracurriculars, your parents couldn’t transport you, or didn’t have transportation)

Tip: You may not want to devote an entire essay to a single challenge—try mentioning your challenge(s) in the context of a larger story (see the story of Louis in the “Hiking” essay below).

The "Four Ways I'm a Genius" Exercise

- From Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. Descriptions from Carla Lane's "The Distance Learning Technology Resource Guide."

STEP ONE

Rank the following seven intelligences from #1 (your best) to #7 (your worst)

Visual-Spatial - think in terms of physical space, as do architects and sailors. Very aware of their environments. They like to draw, do jigsaw puzzles, read maps, daydream. They can be taught through drawings, verbal and physical imagery. Tools include models, graphics, charts, photographs, drawings, 3-D modeling, video, videoconferencing, television, multimedia, texts with pictures/charts/graphs.

Bodily-Kinesthetic - use the body effectively, like a dancer or a surgeon. Keen sense of body awareness. They like movement, making things, touching. They communicate well through body language and being taught through physical activity, hands-on learning, acting out, etc. Tools include equipment and real objects.

Musical - show sensitivity to rhythm and sound. They love music, but they are also sensitive to sounds in their environments. They may study better with music in the background. They can be taught by turning lessons into lyrics, speaking rhythmically, tapping out time. Tools include musical instruments, music, radio, multimedia.

Interpersonal - understanding, interacting with others. These students learn through interaction. They have many friends, empathy for others, street smarts. They can be taught through group activities, seminars, dialogues. Tools include the telephone, audio conferencing, time and attention from the instructor, video conferencing, writing, computer conferencing, E-mail.

Intrapersonal - understanding one's own interests, goals. These learners tend to shy away from others. They're in tune with their inner feelings; they have wisdom, intuition and motivation, as well as a strong will, confidence and opinions. They can be taught through independent study and introspection. Tools include books, creative materials, diaries, privacy and time. They are the most independent of the learners.

Linguistic - using words effectively. These learners have highly developed auditory skills and often think in words. They like reading, playing word games, making up poetry or stories. Tools include computers, games, multimedia, books, tape recorders, and lecture.

Logical-Mathematical - reasoning, calculating. Think conceptually, abstractly and are able to see and explore patterns and relationships. They like to experiment, solve puzzles, ask cosmic questions. They can be taught through logic games, investigations, mysteries. They need to learn and form concepts before they can deal with details.

STEP TWO

Name a place in life where you express your top four intelligences. And bonus points if you connect it to a "leadership" example above!
(Example: "Interpersonal intelligence = leading our club meetings" or "Logical-Mathematical intelligence = handling money at work.")

1.	3.
2.	4.

Values List

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> community | <input type="checkbox"/> growth | <input type="checkbox"/> fast-paced work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> inspiration | <input type="checkbox"/> expertise | <input type="checkbox"/> nutrition |
| <input type="checkbox"/> money | <input type="checkbox"/> order | <input type="checkbox"/> competence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> intellectual | <input type="checkbox"/> privacy | <input type="checkbox"/> practicality |
| <input type="checkbox"/> status | <input type="checkbox"/> self expression | <input type="checkbox"/> creativity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> financial gain | <input type="checkbox"/> stability | <input type="checkbox"/> excitement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> laughter | <input type="checkbox"/> art | <input type="checkbox"/> collaboration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> serenity | <input type="checkbox"/> autonomy | <input type="checkbox"/> social change |
| <input type="checkbox"/> physical challenge | <input type="checkbox"/> risk | <input type="checkbox"/> beauty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> responsibility | <input type="checkbox"/> balance | <input type="checkbox"/> ecological awareness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> competition | <input type="checkbox"/> self-discipline | <input type="checkbox"/> quality relationships |
| <input type="checkbox"/> career | <input type="checkbox"/> courage | <input type="checkbox"/> travel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fame | <input type="checkbox"/> family | <input type="checkbox"/> decisiveness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> working with others | <input type="checkbox"/> empathy | <input type="checkbox"/> curiosity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> freedom | <input type="checkbox"/> working alone | <input type="checkbox"/> spirituality |
| <input type="checkbox"/> security | <input type="checkbox"/> humility | <input type="checkbox"/> loyalty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> strength | <input type="checkbox"/> efficiency | <input type="checkbox"/> honesty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> self-control | <input type="checkbox"/> intensity | <input type="checkbox"/> independence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> hunger | <input type="checkbox"/> health and fitness | <input type="checkbox"/> supervising others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> personal development | <input type="checkbox"/> meaningful work | <input type="checkbox"/> recognition |
| <input type="checkbox"/> trust | <input type="checkbox"/> my country | <input type="checkbox"/> accountability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> faith | <input type="checkbox"/> music | <input type="checkbox"/> democracy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> involvement | <input type="checkbox"/> truth | <input type="checkbox"/> close relationships |
| <input type="checkbox"/> adventure | <input type="checkbox"/> resourcefulness | <input type="checkbox"/> religion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> vulnerability | <input type="checkbox"/> challenges | <input type="checkbox"/> respect |
| <input type="checkbox"/> adaptability | <input type="checkbox"/> commitment | <input type="checkbox"/> bravery |
| <input type="checkbox"/> friendship | <input type="checkbox"/> leadership | <input type="checkbox"/> communication |
| <input type="checkbox"/> excellence | <input type="checkbox"/> helping others | <input type="checkbox"/> change and variety |
| <input type="checkbox"/> job tranquility | <input type="checkbox"/> influence | <input type="checkbox"/> compassion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> power | <input type="checkbox"/> wit | <input type="checkbox"/> nature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> passion | <input type="checkbox"/> success | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cooperation | <input type="checkbox"/> patience | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> affection | <input type="checkbox"/> listening | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> wisdom | <input type="checkbox"/> diversity | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> knowledge | <input type="checkbox"/> love | |

SANTUR

Written using the **Montage Structure** for the **UC Application**
and could have worked for Prompts 2, 3, 7, 8 and even 1.

Do re fa mi, re do fa mi, re do sol fa mi re mi re. Have I completely lost it? Should I be locked up in a mental hospital chained to a chair? No. Then what are these utterances coming from my mouth? Music.

I have devoted thousands of hours of my life to playing the santur, a classical Persian instrument that originated in the Middle East. Some people think I'm strange: a Persian redheaded Jewish teenager obsessed with an ancient musical instrument. But they don't see what I see. My santur is King David's lyre: it can soothe, enrapture, mesmerize.

The santur also allows me to connect to my culture and Persian heritage, and to visit Iran of the past, a culture rich in artistic tradition. Sometimes I imagine performing for the king in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the santur sounds echoing through the Seven Hills of Jerusalem.

Today, some Americans view Iran as a land of terrorists, but when I play the innocent of Iran, the educated, the artists, the innovators, come to life. Iran is not a country of savages; it's Kubla Khan's fountain, an abundant source of knowledge and creativity.

Finally, the santur represents one of my remaining links to my grandfather. In the last few years of his life, Baba Joon did not know me as his grandson. Alzheimer's slowly took over his brain, and eventually he could not recognize me. Baba Joon grew up with the music of the santur and my father plays it in his car every day, so when I play, the music connects all three generations.

In December I'll be releasing my first album, a collection of classical Persian pieces. Proceeds from the album will go toward Alzheimer's research, as I hope to play some small part in finding a cure for the disease. My teacher is one of only a handful of santur teachers from Iran, and I sometimes wonder if the santur will soon become extinct, like the seven thousand endangered languages which may soon be gone.

Not if I have anything to say about it.

Length: 350 words

SANTUR

(Bullet point version)

The UC directors have emphasized that responses to the 2016-2017 prompts need not be beautiful or creative, and a straightforward version (even using bullet points) will work just as well for the UC application. Below is a second version of the Santur essay (given above) that is written in a more straightforward way.

- * I've devoted thousands of hours of my life to playing the santur, a classical Persian instrument that originated in the Middle East.
- * The santur also allows me to connect to my culture and Persian heritage.
- * Today, some Americans view Iran as a land of terrorists, but when I play I believe I help change their perspective.
- * The santur also represents one of my remaining links to my grandfather, who grew up with the music of the santur. My father plays santur music in his car every day, so when I play, the music connects all three generations.
- * In December I'll be releasing my first album, a collection of classical Persian pieces. Proceeds from the album will go toward Alzheimer's research.
- * I sometimes wonder if the santur will soon become extinct. I hope not.

Length: 133 words

SESSION 2

HOW TO STAND OUT ON THE UC PIQS (WITH EXAMPLES)

Let's take a look at each UC prompt one at a time. I'll offer some brainstorming tips, recommend a structure (or two) that might work for each one, then analyze an example for each.

And note that below I'll call them "essays" because, though the UCs would prefer not to call them this, the techniques I describe will work for all sorts of 350 word statements, which I call "essays."

Before we begin, here's a quick reminder of how Narrative and Montage Structures work.

Narrative structure is that typically used by most American films. It's a structure as old as time and storytellers have been using it for thousands of years. Joseph Campbell called it the monomyth or Hero's Journey. Its basic elements are:

- * Status Quo
- * Inciting Incident/Status Quo Change
- * Raise the stakes
- * Moment of Truth
- * Outcome/New Status Quo

Montage structure relies on creating a new whole from separate fragments (pictures, words, music, etc.). In filmmaking, the montage effect is used to condense space and time so that information can be delivered in a more efficient way.

Take the classic "falling in love" montage, commonly used in romantic comedies. We don't see every single interaction; instead, we see: he surprises her at work with flowers, they walk through the park, they dance in the rain, they pass an engagement ring store and she eyes a particular ring. You get the idea.

A few images tell the whole story. And you can use this technique for your essay as well.

Let's see how to do that based on each of the eight PIQs.

1: HOW TO WRITE THE "LEADERSHIP" ESSAY

Prompt: Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.

Recommended Structure: Either Montage or Narrative can work

- * **For the Montage approach,** you might consider discussing several ways you've shown leadership through a particular club/internship/class/sport. You would then have two connective themes (or "focusing lenses") for your essay: leadership and whichever activity you're describing.
- * **For the Narrative approach,** you might consider beginning with a challenge (or series of challenges), then describe what you did about it, then name a few lessons you learned.

In a moment I'll show you how to brainstorm this type of essay, but first let's look at an example.

Example Essay: Switch-Side Policy Debate

Through switch-side policy debate I not only discuss a multitude of competing ideas, but also argue from both sides of widely disputed issues. By equipping me with Protagoras' antilogic and Dissoi Logoi, switch-side policy debate has provided me with a forum to cultivate a diversity of intellectual perspectives that has informed my own intellectual growth.

I strive to give others the same opportunity for intellectual stimulation. Over the past two years, I have helped expand my debate team from a struggling club of 15 to a force of over 100 debaters, leading my team to place first in our debate league. As team President, I teach new debaters fundamentals in communication theory while facilitating formal and informal debates. Playing a dual role as instructor and competitor has allowed me to establish debate as a lasting forum for discussing ideas at my school.

The lessons I learned as both a leader and debater have helped me to succeed beyond my debate circles. Inside the classroom, I possess the openness to consider the views of others and the courage to voice my own opinions. Having been elected to student office four times, I have used these skills to sell my ideas to the student body and earn its vote. More importantly, debate has taught me how to transform these ideas into concrete actions. As the current ASB Vice President, I have used the managerial and communication skills I developed as a debater to spearhead a school wide sustainability campaign that spanned issues concerning water scarcity, ecology, and campus beautification.

Similarly, the lessons I learned in debate will be instrumental in my future work as an entrepreneur and engineer, both of which require the capacity to approach problems critically and clearly articulate complex ideas. Continuing to develop these skills will be crucial if I am to become a competitive member in the future marketplace of ideas.

313 words

Other UC prompts this could have worked for: 3, 4, 7, 8 and (probably) 2

For an in-depth analysis of this essay (and the examples for the other prompts), turn the page!

SWITCH-SIDE POLICY DEBATE

PROMPT 1: Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.

Through switch-side policy debate I not only discuss a multitude of competing ideas, but also argue from both sides of widely disputed issues. By equipping me with Protagoras' antilogic and Dissoi Logoi, switch-side policy debate has provided me with a forum to cultivate a diversity of perspectives that has informed my own intellectual growth.

And I love that he ends his first paragraph with a clear, succinct thesis.

I call this geeky language. A little jargon here shows the author clearly knows his stuff.

I strive to give others the same opportunity for intellectual stimulation. Over the past two years, I have helped expand my debate team from a struggling club of 15 to a force of over 100 debaters, leading my team to place first in our debate league. As team President, I teach new debaters fundamentals in communication theory while facilitating formal and informal debates.

Then he goes straight from "what I've gained" to "what I've shared." So smart.

Specific numbers work well to demonstrate impact. Especially if they're impressive.

Specifics.

Playing a dual role as instructor and competitor has allowed me to establish debate as a lasting forum for discussing ideas at my school, and the lessons I've learned have helped me to succeed beyond my debate circles. Inside the classroom, I possess the openness to consider the views of others and the courage to voice my own opinions. Having been elected to student office four times, I have used these skills to sell my ideas to the student body and earn its vote. More importantly, debate has taught me how to transform these ideas into concrete actions. As the current ASB Vice President, I have used the managerial and communication skills I developed as a debater to spearhead a school wide sustainability campaign that spanned issues concerning water scarcity, ecology, and campus beautification.

Though this will be in his activities list, it can't hurt to work it in here.

And the impact has been not just in his club, but in his school at large.

Connection to potential career. Nice.

This is key: turning ideas into action. Again, shows impact.

Similarly, the lessons I learned in debate will be instrumental in my future work as an entrepreneur and engineer, both of which require the capacity to approach problems critically and clearly articulate complex ideas. Continuing to develop these skills will be crucial if I am to become a competitive member in the future marketplace of ideas.

Here's what his two potential careers have in common.

307 words

This is big scope. And note how neatly the ending returns to the start of the essay. Read the first line and then the last one to see what I mean.

How to Write This Type of Essay

1. Create a simple outline by filling out the...

Best Extracurricular Activity Brainstorm I've Ever Seen (BEABIES)

What is it? It's a great way to generate a lot of content for your essay. Take a look at this example:

Activity: Rowing

What I Did (Day-to-Day)	Problems I Solved	Lessons I Learned & Values/Skills I Developed	Impact I Had (On Self, School, Community and/or Society)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Rowed for 3 years, 9 seasons, and countless hours. * Attended every practice except 9 or 10 because of an injury * Placed twice in the finals and once in semi-finals in the Midwest Scholastic Rowing Championship. * Won 5 gold medals, 4 silver medals, 2 bronze medals, and many other medal-less races. * Spent hours gathering music and created a Spotify playlist of workout music (still update it). * Teach novice rowers techniques, strategies, and mindsets. * Dedicated a big portion of my free time working out. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Slower than most girls in the first month. * Didn't understand the rowing terms or how an organized sport works. * Didn't know how to row correctly and effectively. * Too skinny and out of shape * Lacked proper mentality and good physique. * Bad rowing form that remained poor for a long time * Faced stereotyping from peers against Asians * Learned to communicate my concerns and problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Solid form and technique in both port and starboard side. * "Teamwork is important" is an understatement * When you don't understand, ask. * "Quit crew or triple your commitment." * "Be the meanest dude on the lake." * Drain the last bit of your energy, if not for yourself, then for others and your teammates. * Other teams are not usually as strong as they may seem. * Don't talk when you are on the boat. * Always check your rigger before launching. * Pain from giving your best won't kill you, regret from not giving your best will. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Started to work out/watch what I eat on a daily basis and got healthier. * Changed my definition of living. * Began to have something to fight for in life. * Started to love nature (lake, forests, etc.) * Started to hangout with friends outside of my Chinese circle of friends. * Have new connections with other people besides classmates.

How this works: First, write what you did, then basically ask yourself “So what” three times.

Example:

- A. **What I did:** I started a Robotics Club
 - 1. So what?
- B. **Problem(s) I solved:** I'd been searching for a way to take my interests in Engineering to the next level (had tinkered with taking things apart and watching YouTube videos, but wanted to do more). Also, there weren't that many afterschool programs offered at our school.
 - 1. So what?
- C. **Lessons I learned/Values I gained:** I learned that it's a lot of work to maintain a club, that if one is kind and hard-working great things happen, and that one key to leading a team is learning how to trust team members and not micromanage them.
 - 1. So what?
- D. **Impact on self/school/community/society:** I became more confident in my ability to lead, I gave STEM students at my school a chance to express their creativity, I gave our school its first trophy for something other than football, and not only showed that undocumented students have a lot to offer, but also provided hope to other Dreamers like me (my little sister is taking over the club next year).

2. Decide which two columns are your strongest.

In other words, which two are most impressive: What you did? The problem(s) you solved? The lessons you learned/skills you gained? Or the impact you had?

Examples:

- * In the Switch-Side Policy Debate essay above, the author's most impressive columns were **WHAT I DID** and **IMPACT**, so he featured those in the essay.
- * In the Rowing example, the author didn't have quite as many impressive details related to impact, so the essay might have focused more on the **WHAT I DID** and **VALUES/SKILLS GAINED**.

Once you pick the two most impressive columns, keep in mind you'll want to feature those in your essay. **Note:** If you have one or two details in a third or fourth column that you think is still really important to mention (like something you were recognized for), try and work that into your essay.

3. Theme your paragraphs.

Decide, in other words, what you'd like to do in each section of the essay.

For the Switch-Side Policy Debate essay, for example, the paragraphs might be themed:

- a. The main reason debate has been important to me
- b. How I've impacted others
- c. How debate has impacted me (outside the club itself)
- d. How these skills will help me in my future career or careers

For the Rowing essay, the paragraphs could simply be themed:

- a. Challenges I faced
- b. What I did about it
- c. What I learned

And here's a tip: keep your outline to around 3-5 parts. That'll make your job easier. Once you've done this...

4. Write a draft!

2: THE “CREATIVE” ESSAY

Prompt: Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

Recommended Structure: Montage

I recommend Montage structure for creativity essays, primarily because many of the narrative creativity essays tend to focus on how the author developed his or her talent, which I find to be less interesting than the variety of ways that creativity has manifested itself.

Here’s an essay that demonstrates lots of variety using the Montage structure:

Example Essay: Santur

Do re fa mi, re do fa mi, re do sol fa mi re mi re. Have I completely lost it? Should I be locked up in a mental hospital chained to a chair? No. Then what are these utterances coming from my mouth? Music.

I have devoted thousands of hours of my life to playing the santur, a classical Persian instrument that originated in the Middle East. Some people think I’m strange: a Persian redheaded Jewish teenager obsessed with an ancient musical instrument. But they don’t see what I see. My santur is King David’s lyre: it can soothe, enrapture, mesmerize.

The santur also allows me to connect to my culture and Persian heritage, and to visit Iran of the past, a culture rich in artistic tradition. Sometimes I imagine performing for the king in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the santur sounds echoing through the Seven Hills of Jerusalem.

Today, some Americans view Iran as a land of terrorists, but when I play the innocent of Iran, the educated, the artists, the innovators, come to life. Iran is not a country of savages; it’s Kubla Khan’s fountain, an abundant source of knowledge and creativity.

Finally, the santur represents one of my remaining links to my grandfather. In the last few years of his life, Baba Joon did not know me as his grandson. Alzheimer’s slowly took over his brain, and eventually he could not recognize me. Baba Joon grew up with the music of the santur and my father plays it in his car every day, so when I play, the music connects all three generations.

In December I’ll be releasing my first album, a collection of classical Persian pieces. Proceeds from the album will go toward Alzheimer’s research, as I hope to play some small part in finding a cure for the disease. My teacher is one of only a handful of santur teachers from Iran, and I sometimes wonder if the santur will soon become extinct, like the seven thousand endangered languages which may soon be gone.

Not if I have anything to say about it.

350 words

Other UC prompts this could have worked for: 3, 7, 8 and (probably) 1

For an analysis of this prompt, turn to/check out page

SANTUR

PROMPT 2: Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

Do re fa mi, re do fa mi, re do sol fa mi re mi re. Have I completely lost it? Should I be locked up in a mental hospital chained to a chair? No. Then what are these utterances coming from my mouth? Music.

A lovely hook, and notice how short. If you must use a hook, keep it short. Like maybe this short. Get into the story asap.

I have devoted thousands of hours of my life to playing the santur, a classical Persian instrument that originated in the Middle East. Some people think I'm strange: a Persian redheaded Jewish teenager obsessed with an ancient musical instrument. But they don't see what I see. My santur is King David's lyre: it can soothe, enrapture, mesmerize.

This sentence alone qualifies this essay for the "What makes you unique?" prompt (PIQ #8).

A lovely hook, and notice how short. If you must use a hook, keep it short. Like maybe this short. Get into the story asap.

The santur also allows me to connect to my culture and Persian heritage, and to visit Iran of the past, a culture rich in artistic tradition. Sometimes I imagine performing for the king in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the santur sounds echoing through the Seven Hills of Jerusalem.

Beautiful. Music in the language even (read this aloud to hear what I mean).

Today, some Americans view Iran as a land of terrorists, but when I play the innocent of Iran, the educated, the artists, the innovators, come to life. Iran is not a country of savages; it's Kubla Khan's fountain, an abundant source of knowledge and creativity.

Music as a tool for social change.

Finally, the santur represents one of my remaining links to my grandfather. In the last few years of his life, Baba Joon did not know me as his grandson. Alzheimer's slowly took over his brain, and eventually he could not recognize me. Baba Joon grew up with the music of the santur and my father plays it in his car every day, so when I play, the music connects all three generations.

Music also connects the author with family, several generations back, in fact.

Again: music as a tool for social change, but this time in a different way.

In December I'll be releasing my first album, a collection of classical Persian pieces. Proceeds from the album will go toward Alzheimer's research, as I hope to play some small part in finding a cure for the disease. My teacher is one of only a handful of santur teachers from Iran, and I sometimes wonder if the santur will soon become extinct, like the seven thousand endangered languages which may soon be gone.

Wow. This insight reveals the author is capable of making surprising and wonderful connections.

Not if I have anything to say about it.

350 words

Gem of an ending. Memorable because it's so specific.

How to Write This Type of Essay: The UC (Uncommon Connections) Exercise

1. Choose a topic. (Obviously.)
2. Imagine what someone else writing an essay on this same topic might write about—in particular, what values might that person emphasize? (Example: for violin, someone else might emphasize “discipline, hard work, and perseverance.” But that’s what a lot of others would focus on.) In short, I’m asking you to brainstorm the cliché version of an essay on this topic before you begin your own essay. To give you some ideas of what others might write about, use the Values Exercise on the next page.
3. Once you’ve brainstormed some usual (read: common or obvious) values, vow to NOT discuss only these values in your essay. Why? You’ll blend in.

Dare to stand out! How? Like this:

4. Choose several uncommon values. (Example: for violin, you might select “privacy, practicality, or even write ‘healthy boundaries’ in one of the blanks” and then discuss how violin has helped you develop all three of these instead.)

Here’s a good general rule: A boring essay discusses a common topic and makes common connections using common language, while a stand-out essay discusses an uncommon topic, makes uncommon connections and uses uncommon language. Here it is again, so you remember it:

A boring essay: common topic > common connections > common language
A stand-out essay: uncommon topic > uncommon connections > uncommon language

The santur essay above is a great example of a stand-out essay:

- * Uncommon topic: santur
- * Uncommon connections (i.e. values): family, culture, social change, endangered languages, etc.
- * Uncommon language: “Sometimes I imagine performing for the king in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the santur sounds echoing through the Seven Hills of Jerusalem” and “Iran is not a country of savages; it’s Kubla Khan’s fountain, an abundant source of knowledge and creativity.”

IMPORTANT: I know what you’re probably thinking. “I don’t have an uncommon topic!” Or, “I’m not a writer!” Either is okay. Really: you can write a great essay still. How? Use your brilliant, infinite brain to make several uncommon connections. In fact, the more common your topic, the more uncommon your connections will need to be.

Like games? I turned the process I just described turned into one: [Click here for the UC Essay Game](http://tinyurl.com/UCessaygame), or type into your browser “<http://tinyurl.com/UCessaygame>”

THE VALUES EXERCISE

WHAT DO I VALUE?

- ☐ community
- ☐ inspiration
- ☐ money
- ☐ intellect
- ☐ status
- ☐ financial gain
- ☐ laughter
- ☐ serenity
- ☐ physical challenge
- ☐ responsibility
- ☐ competition
- ☐ career
- ☐ fame
- ☐ working with others
- ☐ freedom
- ☐ security
- ☐ strength
- ☐ self-control
- ☐ hunger
- ☐ personal development
- ☐ trust
- ☐ faith
- ☐ involvement
- ☐ adventure
- ☐ vulnerability
- ☐ adaptability
- ☐ friendship
- ☐ excellence
- ☐ job tranquility
- ☐ power
- ☐ passion
- ☐ cooperation
- ☐ affection
- ☐ wisdom
- ☐ knowledge

- ☐ growth
- ☐ expertise
- ☐ order
- ☐ privacy
- ☐ self expression
- ☐ stability
- ☐ art
- ☐ autonomy
- ☐ risk
- ☐ balance
- ☐ self-discipline
- ☐ courage
- ☐ family
- ☐ empathy
- ☐ working alone
- ☐ humility
- ☐ efficiency
- ☐ intensity
- ☐ health and fitness
- ☐ meaningful work
- ☐ my country
- ☐ music
- ☐ truth
- ☐ resourcefulness
- ☐ challenges
- ☐ commitment
- ☐ leadership
- ☐ helping others
- ☐ influence
- ☐ wit
- ☐ success
- ☐ patience
- ☐ listening
- ☐ diversity
- ☐ love

- ☐ fast-paced work
- ☐ nutrition
- ☐ competence
- ☐ practicality
- ☐ creativity
- ☐ excitement
- ☐ collaboration
- ☐ social change
- ☐ beauty
- ☐ ecological awareness
- ☐ quality relationships
- ☐ travel
- ☐ decisiveness
- ☐ curiosity
- ☐ spirituality
- ☐ loyalty
- ☐ honesty
- ☐ independence
- ☐ supervising others
- ☐ recognition
- ☐ accountability
- ☐ democracy
- ☐ close relationships
- ☐ religion
- ☐ respect
- ☐ bravery
- ☐ communication
- ☐ change and variety
- ☐ compassion
- ☐ nature

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

3: THE “GREATEST TALENT OR SKILL” ESSAY

Prompt: What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?

Recommended Structure: Montage

The steps I've outlined for writing Prompt 2 (i.e. the UC or Uncommon Connections Exercise) will work well for this prompt.

First, let's look at an example of a great essay, then I'll explain how the author wrote it.

Example Essay: Juggling

When I first joined Boulder Juggling club I had no idea what I was getting into. I could juggle three balls, and aspired to master four. To most non-jugglers, that's basically it: more and more numbers of balls, with a few simple, showy tricks. But I was quick to learn that juggling possessed hidden worlds of math, community and art.

The language of juggling is Siteswap, a crossover to another one of my passions, mathematics. It is a mathematical model of all juggling patterns, and one such pattern my friends invented was the “12-beat feed,” which involved the “feeder” exchanging clubs in 3-count (every third throw) with one “feedee” and 4-count with the other. Thus, the pattern would repeat every 12 throws (surprisingly, this is actually the result of a theorem in Group Theory that $|(g,h)| = \text{lcm}(|g|, |h|)$, which I only formally learned this year).

After we successfully juggled it, which was not an easy task, we started talking about other applications of this kind of juggling. It was clear and exciting to all three of us that this pattern was something different, something that had not been done before. Together we discovered several new intellectually stimulating formations, some of which required many more jugglers who eagerly jumped in.

Since then we've learned there are thousands of multi-person juggling patterns, some of which involve walking, running, special throws, height variation, “stealing” passes, and all kinds of sophisticated tricks imaginable—and we even set a World Record for juggling while jogging. Over time I've come to see juggling as an art form, and I enjoy learning these complex routines, as well as inventing my own.

For me, juggling is as much a relaxing hobby as a vast and unexplored field of intellectual thought.

290 words

Other UC prompts this could have worked for: 2, 3, and 8

How to Write This Type of Essay

As with Prompt 2, I recommend completing the Uncommon Connections Exercise. How? Like this:

1. Choose a topic. (In this case, the author chose juggling, which happens to be an uncommon one—which is great, but again not required for a great essay.)
2. Imagine what someone else writing an essay on the same topic might write about using the Values Exercise—in other words, brainstorm the cliché version. (In this case, a cliché juggling essay might emphasize values like “hard work” or “concentration” or “risk.”)
3. Once you've done this, vow to NOT discuss only these values in your essay. Why? You'll blend in. Stand out by instead electing to:
4. Choose several uncommon values. (This author chose to connect juggling to math, community and art. Nice.)

Then, before you start writing:

5. Create a simple outline by picking a theme for each paragraph. In this case, the simple outline was:
 - a. Juggling is more than people think it is
 - b. Juggling is math
 - c. ...community
 - d. ...and art
 - e. Ending

You'll find a closer analysis of this essay on the next page.

JUGGLING

PROMPT 3: What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?

When I first joined Boulder Juggling club I had no idea what I was getting into. I could juggle three balls, and aspired to master four. To most non-jugglers, that's basically it: more and more numbers of balls, with a few simple, showy tricks. But I was quick to learn that juggling possessed hidden worlds of math, community and art.

He dispels a common misconception here, which is a great way to open...

There's some wonderful "geeky language" here—this guy clearly knows his stuff—both juggling and math.

The language of juggling is Siteswap, a crossover to another one of my passions, mathematics. It is a mathematical model of all juggling patterns, and one such pattern my friends invented was the "12-beat feed," which involved the "feeder" exchanging clubs in 3-count (every third throw) with one "feedee" and 4-count with the other. Thus, the pattern would repeat every 12 throws (surprisingly, this is actually the result of a theorem in Group Theory that $|(g,h)| = \text{lcm}(|g|, |h|)$, which I only formally learned this year).

...and here he piques our interest. "Ooh," we wonder, "What does juggling have to do with these things?"

After we successfully juggled it, which was not an easy task, we started talking about other applications of this kind of juggling. It was clear and exciting to all three of us that this pattern was something different, something that had not been done before. Together we discovered several new intellectually stimulating formations, some of which required many more jugglers who eagerly jumped in, and we created formations we never could have completed without their help.

Community

Since then we've learned there are thousands of multi-person juggling patterns, some of which involve walking, running, special throws, height variation, "stealing" passes, and all kinds of sophisticated tricks imaginable—and we even set a World Record for "joggling" (juggling while jogging). Over time I've come to see juggling as an art form, and I enjoy learning these complex routines, as well as inventing my own.

Although the connection could perhaps be a bit clearer here, in a general sense we get it: there are lots of possibilities in the juggling world.

For me, juggling is as much a relaxing hobby as a vast and unexplored field of intellectual thought.

303 words

Straightforward ending. Note that not every essay has to end in a flashy way. Simple is okay too.

4: THE “EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY OR BARRIER” ESSAY

Prompt: Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.

Recommended Structure:

- * For significant educational opportunity: Either Narrative or Montage
- * For overcoming an educational barrier: Narrative

There are a wide range of possibilities for this essay. For the “significant educational opportunity,” you could write about anything from an internship at UC Berkeley to an amazing trip around the world. For the “educational barrier,” you could write about the fact that your school dropped 50% of its after-school offerings due to budget cuts or didn’t offer AP Computer Science Principles course, and describe what you did about it.

The essay below is the second kind, as it discusses a series of educational barriers the student worked actively to overcome. Why do I recommend the Narrative Structure when discussing how a student has overcome an educational barrier? Because essentially the basic “challenges essay” structure works well for this:

1. Challenge I faced
2. What I did about it
3. What I learned

Let’s look at an example that used this simple structure:

Example Essay: Math Problems

I’ve often had difficulty finding challenging courses to take. Freshman year I enjoyed taking AP Calculus BC, but by Sophomore year, I had run out of mathematics classes, so I enrolled in the only Calculus 3 class available to high school students at the University of Colorado, Boulder (CU). Unfortunately, the class wasn’t very stimulating, so I designed an independent study course using MIT’s OpenCourseWare. I watched five lectures a week to get caught up, completing the same problem sets and exams as the MIT students, only at a faster pace. Calculus once again became my favorite subject, as I was inspired by a brilliant professor and the amazing depth of content covered.

A similar situation occurred with Japanese and Science. My school scheduled AP Physics C and Japanese 2 in the same period, forcing me to choose between my passions. But once again, I opted for door number three, skipping ahead to Japanese 3 and studying over the summer to get caught up. The plan succeeded; I was able to take AP Physics C while becoming the top student in Japanese 3 and later AP Japanese 4. I currently have a 98% in my Advanced Japanese class at CU.

Then in Junior year it happened again. AP Chemistry did not fit into my schedule, so I had to take Advanced Chemistry instead. We were learning at a slower pace than the AP class, which bothered me. I wanted to learn more, so I plowed through my Linear Algebra course, finishing it a month early. I used the extra study time to cover the additional AP content, and I scored a 5 on the AP exam.

I’m currently taking half my classes at the university and as I look back on all the obstacles that my special circumstances have put before me I remember all the times I’ve been angry and desperate. But as I overcame each one, I’ve grown ever more able to calmly deal with the next. Knowledge is abundant, and I know now that I will always be able to find some way to continue pursuing it.

350 words

Other UC prompts this could have worked for: None. Although it's worth noting that he could have written a (very) short version of this and included it in his Additional Info section. (And by very short I mean 100-150 words max.)

How to Write This Type of Essay

This takes the basic “challenges essay” approach:

1. What challenge(s) did I face? (about 1/3 of the essay)
2. What did I do about it? (about 1/3 of the essay)
3. What did I learn? (about 1/3 of the essay)

Often an essay will focus on a single challenge and a student will first describe the challenge, then what s/he did about it, then what s/he learned. But in the example above, the author faced a series of challenges, so he chose to do a mini-version of the “challenges” structure in each paragraph. The structure looks like this:

1. Math
 - a. Challenge I faced
 - b. What I did about it
 - c. How it turned out/What I learned
2. Japanese and AP Physics
 - a. Challenge I faced
 - b. What I did about it
 - c. How it turned out/What I learned
3. AP Chem
 - a. Challenge I faced
 - b. What I did about it
 - c. How it turned out/What I learned
4. What I learned through all these experiences

It's clear, concise and works well.

To clarify: you can choose to employ this three part structure in each paragraph (as in the example above), or separate the three parts into separate paragraphs (one paragraph per section).

If you'd like to see a more specific analysis of the Math Problems essay, turn the page.

MATH PROBLEMS

PROMPT 4: Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.

The problem is succinctly stated...

I've often had difficulty finding challenging courses to take. Freshman year I

enjoyed taking AP Calculus BC, but by Sophomore year, I had run out of mathematics classes, so I enrolled in the only Calculus 3 class available to high school students at the University of Colorado, Boulder (CU). Unfortunately, the class wasn't very stimulating, so I designed an independent study course using MIT's OpenCourseWare. I watched five lectures a week to get caught up, completing the same problem sets and exams as the MIT students, only at a faster pace. Calculus once again became my favorite subject, as I was inspired by a brilliant professor and the amazing depth of content covered.

...then he segues right into what he did about it.

New problem...

A similar situation occurred with Japanese and Science. My school scheduled AP Physics C and Japanese 2 in the same period, forcing me to choose between my passions. But once again, I opted for door number three, skipping ahead to Japanese 3 and studying over the summer to get caught up. The plan succeeded; I was able to take AP Physics C while becoming the top student in Japanese 3 and later AP Japanese 4. I currently have a 98% in my Advanced Japanese class at CU.

...new solution.

Problem

And here's the impact this experience had on him.

Solution (that he came up with!)

Result

Note how the structure repeats:
Problem, Action, Result

Then in Junior year it happened again. AP Chemistry did not fit into my schedule, so I had to take Advanced Chemistry instead. We were learning at a slower pace than the AP class, which bothered me. I wanted to learn more, so I plowed through my Linear Algebra course, finishing it a month early. I used the extra study time to cover the additional AP content, and I scored a 5 on the AP exam.

I'm currently taking half my classes at the university and as I look back on all the obstacles that my special circumstances have put before me I remember all the time I've been angry and desperate. But as I overcame each one, I've grown ever more able to calmly deal with the next. Knowledge is abundant, and I know now that I will always be able to find some way to continue pursuing it.

Impact of these experiences overall

350 words

5: THE “SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES” ESSAY

Prompt: Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?

Recommended Structure: Narrative

Begin with the basic 1-2-3 “challenges” essay structure:

1. Challenge(s)
2. What I did
3. What I learned

From here, things can get more complex, so here are some useful questions to ask for each of these parts. Answering these will turn your essay from a three-paragraph essay into a six-paragraph essay, and it’s doubtful you’ll have room for many more in a 350-word statement.

1. Challenges
 - a. What does the reader need to know in order to understand why this [whatever challenge you faced] was such a big deal for me?
 - b. What circumstances made the situation even worse?
2. What I did
 - a. What did I do first that didn’t work, or didn’t help, before I did the thing that did work, or did help? In other words: What did I try doing (and fail at) to overcome the challenges before trying something else?
 - b. After I did the thing that worked/helped, what else did I do? (That’s a simple question, but it will push you to think harder, and to add variety.)
3. What I learned
 - a. How can I go beyond the obvious take-away?
 - i. Tip: One way is with a “not only... but also...” structure. (Example: “Not only did I learn the value of working with others, but I also learned that there is a time when working alone is actually okay—in fact, sometimes it’s exactly right.”)
 - b. How did I meet a deeper need?
 - i. For this, you’ll need to explore your deeper needs, something you can do through the Feelings and Needs Exercise, which you can find a video version of [at this link](#) or at the bottom of the lesson for Session Two.

Here’s a shortened version of an essay that was written as part of a four-day workshop. The student wrote this after completing the Feelings and Needs exercise, which you’ll work through in a moment, and then shortened it from 650 words (for the Common App) to 350 words (so that I could share it with you in this Guide):

Example Essay: Breaking Up With Mom

When I was fifteen years old I broke up with my mother. We could still be friends, I told her, but I needed my space, and she couldn’t give me that.

She and I both knew that I was the only person that she had in America. Her family was in Russia, she only spoke to her estranged ex-husband in court, her oldest son avoided her at all costs. And yet, at fifteen years old, I wasn’t equipped to effectively calm her down from her nightly anxiety attacks. At forty-three, she wasn’t willing to believe that I did love her, but that I couldn’t be responsible for stabilizing her life.

Moving in with my dad full time felt like I was abandoning her after tying a noose around her neck. But as my Drama teacher (and guardian angel) pointed out, my mother wasn’t going to get better if I kept enabling her, and that I wasn’t going to be able to grow if I was constrained by her dependence on me.

For the first time, I had taken action. I was never again going to passively let life happen to me.

During four long months of separation, I filled the space that my mom previously dominated with learning: everything and anything. I taught myself French through online programs, built websites, and began editing my drawings on Photoshop to sell them online. When my dad lost his third job in five years, I learned to sew my own clothes and applied my new knowledge to costume design in the Drama Department.

On stage, I learned to empathize. Backstage, I worked with teams of dedicated and mutually supportive students. In our improv group, I gained the confidence to act on my instincts. With the help of my Drama teacher, I learned to humble myself enough to ask for help.

On my sixteenth birthday, I picked up the phone and dialed my mom. I waited through three agonizingly long pauses between rings.

“Katyush?”

“Hi mom, it’s me.”

350 words

Other UC prompts this could have worked for: 8

How to Write This Type of Essay

1. Complete the [Feelings and Needs Exercise](http://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/feelings-needs-exercise) (also available in this guide at the bottom of Session Two) or go to: www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/feelings-needs-exercise.
2. Decide what the 3-6 “chunks” of your essay are. One simple way to do this is to use the Challenges/What I did/What I learned structure. Use the questions in the outline above to expand from the three “chunks” (i.e. paragraphs or “scenes” in your story) to five or six. Note that you might also choose to take your Feelings and Needs Exercise and simply write a paragraph on each column. (Cool, huh?) Heads up that you may want to weave the feelings and needs into the same paragraph, or make them a part of the “Challenges” paragraph, but generally you can use that exercise to map out your essay.
 - a. You can also use the Narrative Structure to map out your essay, which you can learn more about [at this link](#).
3. Write a draft!

You’ll find a closer analysis of the above essay on the next page, including how the author uses the elements of Narrative Structure.

BREAKING UP WITH MOM

PROMPT 5: Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?

Great opening. The humor is subtle and establishes a point of view (and some critical information) at the very start. This is the Inciting Incident and raises an important question for the reader: Will mom and daughter reconcile? We'll have to wait until the final line of the story to find out.

When I was fifteen years old I broke up with my mother. We could still be friends, I told her, but I needed my space, and she couldn't give me that.

She and I both knew that I was the only person that she had in America. Her family was in Russia, she only spoke to her estranged ex-husband in court, her oldest son avoided her at all costs. And yet, at fifteen years old, I wasn't equipped to effectively calm her down from her nightly anxiety attacks. At forty-three, she wasn't willing to believe that I did love her, but that I couldn't be responsible for stabilizing her life.

This gives us a clear sense of why the author felt she had to do what she had to do. It's called Raising the Stakes.

Raising the Stakes even further—now she's at the point where something must change.

Moving in with my dad full time felt like I was abandoning her after tying a noose around her neck. But as my Drama teacher (and guardian angel) pointed out, my mother wasn't going to get better if I kept enabling her, and that I wasn't going to be able to grow if I was constrained by her dependence on me.

Turning point.

For the first time, I had taken action. I was never again going to passively let life happen to me.

The "What I learned" paragraph. And she saves the deepest/most important lesson for last.

During four long months of separation, I filled the space that my mom previously dominated with learning: everything and anything. I taught myself French through online programs, built websites, and began editing my drawings on Photoshop to sell them online. When my dad lost his third job in five years, I learned to sew my own clothes and applied my new knowledge to costume design in the Drama Department.

Wonderful montage. Look how much she did in those four months. And look how succinctly expressed: just 46 words!

On stage, I learned to empathize. Backstage, I worked with teams of dedicated and mutually supportive students. In our improv group, I gained the confidence to act on my instincts. With the help of my Drama teacher, I learned to humble myself enough to ask for help.

On my sixteenth birthday, I picked up the phone and dialed my mom. I waited through three agonizingly long pauses between rings.

"Katyush?"

"Hi mom, it's me."

350 words

The ending makes the reader do a little work (which is fine), but, like the rest of the essay, it's succinctly expressed. This author packs a lot into 350 words.

6: THE “FAVORITE SUBJECT” ESSAY

Prompt: Describe your favorite academic subject and explain how it has influenced you.

Recommended Structure: Montage

I'm recommending the Montage structure here primarily because I have never seen this type of essay done really well in the Narrative format. (If you've seen one, or written one, send it to me!) The Montage structure simply allows for more latitude, more variety. It's less "Here's how I became interested in X" and more "Look at all the cool ways that X applies to my life!"

Take the following example essay, which is on programming. "But wait!" I hear you say. "That's not like an official academic subject like Math or English!" And sure, if you want to be safe and you're concerned about a reader docking you points because you chose to think outside the box, then you may choose not to write about programming. But this student did. And it turned out great.

Example Essay: Programming

Some say I don't seem like the "techy type." That doesn't surprise me—I've always been the illogical sort, the sort who loves slam poetry and movies that make no sense. My love affair with programming only began a little over three years ago, during the summer I tried to reinvent myself.

Somewhere between studying Esperanto, learning the violin, and figuring out eyeliner, I decided to become a hacker. The problem? I'd need a working knowledge of computers. After some Googling around, I settled on a decent-but-free guide to Python and got to work.

And I loved it. I loved the logic of it, loved that there were a million solutions to one single problem. I forgot all about hacking and instead took to writing games. They started simple—little virtual pets I could feed and name and sometimes accidentally murder—but by the time the summer drew to a close, my projects had blossomed into thousand-line epic adventures.

Needless to say, when I found out my school offered an introductory programming course, I signed up immediately. In fact, I took every class I could get my hands on, from APCS to after-school courses at a nearby college. Programming soon proved a useful skill, too; I wrote apps for everything, from schedule-keeping to helping me memorize poems for English. Though I still wasn't the "techy type"—I loved my fashion blogs and my fantasy novels—I found myself turning to my knowledge of technology to solve day-to-day problems.

The summer after my junior year, I took an internship at a local start up. There, designing childrens' fitness games, of all things, I realized there was no "techy type."

Technology isn't all hacking and cold, hard logic; it's taking creative approaches to real-world problems. Programming is an art—an art with the power to change the world.

306 words

Other UC prompts this could have worked for: 2, 3, 4 and 8

How to Write This Type of Essay

1. Summon the BEABIES:

Best Extracurricular Activity Brainstorm I've Ever Seen

What I Did (Day-to-Day)	Problems I Solved	Lessons I Learned & Values/Skills I Developed	Impact I Had (On Self, School, Community and/or Society)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Decided to become a hacker * Googled around and found a free guide to Python * Started writing games, first small then much bigger * Took an intro course at school * Took an internship at a local start up designing childrens' fitness games 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Reinvented myself * Challenged my own ideas about what/who a "techy type" was 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Realized there was no "techy type" * Technology isn't all hacking and cold, hard logic; it's taking creative approaches to real-world problems. * Programming is an art—an art with the power to change the world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Wrote apps that were helpful for solving day-to-day problems (scheduling, memorizing poems for English class)

Though the author of the "Programming" essay above didn't use this exercise, here's what her BEABIES might've looked like if she had:

Activity: Programming

Notice you don't have to go all crazy with this chart to write a solid essay—although if you want to, knock yourself out (not literally, please). Once you've filled in this chart,

2. **Decide which two columns are your strongest.** BUT BEFORE YOU DO THIS, ask yourself, could I strengthen my weaker columns? Are any of the columns empty? If so, are there any details I'm leaving out? See if you can put at least two things in each column.
3. **Decide on the 3-6 "chunks" (read: paragraphs) of your essay,** and **give each one a theme.**

Example:

- a. What I did: decided to become a hacker, taught myself to program, started writing games, took classes at school, got an internship
- b. What I learned: no such thing as a "techy type," technology can be creative
- c. Impact: Programming can help in life too

That simple? Yup.

4. **Write a draft.**

Take a look at the next page for an analysis of why this essay works.

PROGRAMMING

PROMPT 6: Describe your favorite academic subject and explain how it has influenced you.

Some say I don't seem like the "techy type." That doesn't surprise me—I've always been the illogical sort, the sort who loves slam poetry and movies that make no sense. My love affair with programming only began a little over three years ago, during the summer I tried to reinvent myself.

If possible, make your topic clear at the start of your UC statement—and this applies to your other 350-word statements—as your reader may be reading very fast. There are exceptions, of course, but this is a good general rule for the UC prompts.

Love the variety. The seeming contradictions of loving poetry, movies, and technology (which aren't actually contradictions) make for an interesting opening (and human).

Somewhere between studying Esperanto, learning the violin, and figuring out eyeliner, I decided to become a hacker. The problem? I'd need a working knowledge of computers. After some Googling around, I settled on a decent-but-free guide to Python and got to work.

LOVE these little details. Don't you want to know this person?

Self-starter. Love it.

And I loved it. I loved the logic of it, loved that there were a million solutions to one single problem. I forgot all about hacking and instead took to writing games. They started simple—little virtual pets I could feed and name and sometimes accidentally murder—but by the time the summer drew to a close, my projects had blossomed into thousand-line epic adventures.

Again, note the build: first at school, then at a nearby college, then in everyday life.

Notice how the author builds the progression... first small, then bigger. Learn from this. It's especially important in the middle of the essay at or around the Turning Point.

Needless to say, when I found out my school offered an introductory programming course, I signed up immediately. In fact, I took every class I could get my hands on, from APCS to after-school courses at a nearby college. Programming soon proved a useful skill, too; I wrote apps for everything, from schedule-keeping to helping me memorize poems for English. Though I still wasn't the "techy type"—I loved my fashion blogs and my fantasy novels—I found myself turning to my knowledge of technology to solve day-to-day problems.

The summer after my junior year, I took an internship at a local start up. There, designing childrens' fitness games, of all things, I realized there was no "techy type."

This takes it to the next level and shows initiative—the UCs love this.

Technology isn't all hacking and cold, hard logic; it's taking creative approaches to real-world problems. Programming is an art—an art with the power to change the world.

306 words

This resonates because the author has shown how, at least in a few ways, programming has changed her world (see 4th paragraph for more).

7: THE “COMMUNITY SERVICE” ESSAY

Prompt: What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

Recommended Structure: Narrative

I've saved the best for (almost) last. Here's an exercise that I created based on an article I read about a pitch that Elon Musk made for the Tesla Powerwall. [Here is that article](http://tinyurl.com/ElonMuskPitch), or type in “<http://tinyurl.com/ElonMuskPitch>” (Read it sometime if you have a few minutes to spare or if you end up writing a “Community Service” essay.)

What's the Powerwall? It doesn't much matter for this exercise, but it's basically a better, more eco-friendly battery.

Here's the gist of Musk's pitch, in author Andy Raskin's own words:

“Musk's delivery isn't stellar. He's self-conscious and fidgety. But at the end, his audience cheers. For a battery.

That's because Musk does five things right that you should emulate in every pitch you ever make to anybody. And you should do them in this order:

- #1: Name the enemy
- #2: Answer “Why now?”
- #3: Show the promised land before explaining how you'll get there
- #4: Identify obstacles—then explain how you'll overcome them
- #5: Present evidence that you're not just blowing hot air”

Ethan writing again.

You can totally steal this for your extracurricular essay. Shall I show you? I shall. Here's what I call:

The Elon Musk Exercise

(a.k.a. – How to Write an Amazing Community Service/Volunteer Essay)

Here's how to outline your essay on a community service or volunteer project

1. Identify the problem
2. Raise the stakes (and perhaps answer, "Why now?")
3. Articulate the vision: show the promised land before explaining how you got there
4. Describe what you did
5. Clarify your role: Why were (or are) you crucial to the project/club's success?
6. Impact you had, lessons learned, or values gained

"But wait!" I hear you say. "That's way too much to squeeze into 350 words."

Are you sure?

Behold:

Example Essay: "C3"

I live in the suburb of Los Angeles, California, known to its residents as the bubble. It has the perfect weather, location, and schools. As amazing as it sounds, however, growing up in La Cañada Flintridge has its drawbacks: the community pressures adolescents to achieve success through mainly academic means. While this approach isn't necessarily wrong, it can be difficult, particularly in my high school, to thrive in a creative and imaginative way.

Sophomore year, my friends and I began to wonder, *What if the teenagers of La Cañada had greater opportunities to express themselves. To pursue their creativity. To follow their dreams.*

That's when we decided to start the Catalyzing Creativity Club.

Founded in 2012, the Catalyzing Creativity Club (C3, for short), provides students the opportunity to pursue their passion and aspirations outside the classroom.

Some of our opportunities include: a yearly music festival for our community's young aspiring musicians that showcases local talent to the masses and scouts; a technology expo, which allows students to be rewarded with funding and demonstrate their coding abilities to prospective companies; recording sessions for aspiring musicians, photo-publishing competitions, and a variety of guest speakers ranging from nineteen-year-old college seniors to millionaire entrepreneurs. In addition, we have a blog for aspiring writers to publish their work and are holding a shoe drive for underprivileged athletes.

As vice president of finances for C3, I work to ensure we can fund these activities. I handle our bank account, fundraising, and organize the event planning. Moreover, I make sure that C3's activities and finances are approved by and follow the guidelines of my high school. This role is crucial, as we work to achieve non-profit status.

Even though C3 is only a few years old, I believe it is already making an impact in the community. As we grow and the opportunities we provide become more popular, our hope is to inspire our peers to follow their dreams and burst the La Cañada Flintridge bubble.

333 words

Other UC prompts this could have worked for: 1, 5 and 8

See? Totally possible. Here's a quick analysis of that essay's structure:

C3

PROMPT 7: What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

In terms of the "Elon Musk" Method, here the author establishes The Problem

I live in the suburb of Los Angeles, California, known to its residents as the bubble. It has the perfect weather, location, and schools. As amazing as it sounds, however, growing up in La Cañada Flintridge has its drawbacks: the community pressures adolescents to achieve success through mainly academic means. While this approach isn't necessarily wrong, it can be difficult, particularly in my high school, to thrive in a creative and imaginative way.

The Promised Land (Before You Get There)

Sophomore year, my friends and I began to wonder, What if the teenagers of La Cañada had greater opportunities to express themselves. To pursue their creativity. To follow their dreams.

Clear mission statement (i.e. the club's stated purpose)

That's when we decided to start the Catalyzing Creativity Club.

Founded in 2012, the Catalyzing Creativity Club (C3, for short), provides students the opportunity to pursue their passion and aspirations outside the classroom.

What I/We Did About It

Some of our opportunities include: a yearly music festival for our community's young aspiring musicians that showcases local talent to the masses and scouts; a technology expo, which allows students to be rewarded with funding and demonstrate their coding abilities to prospective companies; recording sessions for aspiring musicians, photo-publishing competitions, and a variety of guest speakers ranging from nineteen-year-old college seniors to millionaire entrepreneurs. In addition, we have a blog for aspiring writers to publish their work and are holding a shoe drive for underprivileged athletes.

Specific ways we have worked to bring the mission to life (details are important here)

What my role has been and why that role is important

As vice president of finances for C3, I work to ensure we can fund these activities. I handle our bank account, fundraising, and organize the event planning. Moreover, I make sure that C3's activities and finances are approved by and follow the guidelines of my high school. This role is crucial, as we work to achieve non-profit status for Investing in Imagination.

Even though C3 is only a few years old, I believe it is already making an impact in the community. As we grow and the opportunities we provide become more popular, our hope is to inspire our peers to follow their dreams and burst the La Cañada Flintridge bubble.

Impact (the more specific and tangible the better)

333 words

How to Write This Type of Essay

1. Get a blank sheet of paper, turn it horizontally, and create these columns:

The Problem or Challenge	Raise the Stakes/Why now?	Promised land/Our vision	What I/We Did	My specific role	Impact/ Lessons/Values

2. Then fill in the chart.
3. Turn the paper vertical and notice (voila!) that six columns = six paragraphs.
4. Write a draft using one column per paragraph.

Once you've finished with your draft...

5. Read the first sentence of each paragraph aloud and see if they flow together.
 - a. If not, rewrite them so they do. Then rewrite the paragraphs so they connect to those first sentences.
 - b. If they do flow together, walk away from your computer, and go get a glass of cold water. Because you're done. And because hydrating is important.

8: THE “ONE THING THAT SETS YOU APART” ESSAY

Prompt: What is the one thing that you think sets you apart from other candidates applying to the Univ. of California?

To me, this is a kind of catch-all, or “Topic of your choice” prompt that essentially asks, “What else you got?” Several of the samples above, you’ll notice, work for this prompt too.

Recommended Structure: Montage (probably)

While Narrative structure could certainly work here, most great narratives have a conflict or challenge to work through, likely qualifying your topic for one of the other prompts. So I’m going to recommend Montage structure here, both because it’s hard to imagine a great story without a challenge of conflict, and because my example below uses Montage structure.

This also happens to be one of my favorite essays:

Example Essay: Hiking

I am a history nerd, to the point where I would be that guy reading history textbooks for fun. However, reading about history can only go so far. Through Boy Scouts, I have been able to arrange and lead Historical Trail hikes, giving myself and my troop first hand perspectives on what it felt like to sleep at Valley Forge in the winter, or what the walk up Breed’s Hill along Boston’s Freedom Trail is really like. Naturally, I became the troop “story-teller” along these hikes, adding my own tidbits of information such as pointing out Eisenhower’s five-star general flag waving from his personal putting green in Gettysburg, or how Spuyten Duyvil was perhaps named following one of the first reported shark attacks in America.

Organizing these historical hikes has also given me the opportunity to teach younger Scouts about various Scouting skills, from orienteering (using a map and compass) to conservation principles like Leave-No-Trace. My troop engages in trail maintenance projects, and we actively monitor a trail we adopted from the NY/NJ Trail Conference.

I especially relished the opportunity to apply what I had learned in AP Biology towards actually helping preserve the environment. It is one thing to learn about pollution, global warming, and invasive species in a classroom; it is another thing entirely to see the biodiversity of an ecosystem quickly succumb to man-made pressures.

Finally, hiking with the Boy Scouts has given me the chance to help others experience the beauty of the outdoors. On a recent hike, a new Scout, Louis, confided in me how disconnected he felt away from his video games. I stayed with Louis for the remainder of the hike and pointed out everything from milkweed stalks to coyote scat. After the hike, Louis was exhausted but had a glimmer of excitement towards the environment around him, and could even tell the difference between poison ivy and Virginia creeper. Louis is currently one of my troop’s most active younger Scouts.

When I’m hiking, I’m not merely a hiker; I’m a historian, a conservationist, and a teacher all in one.

347 words

Other UC prompts this could have worked for: 1, 2, 4 and 7

Lovely essay, eh? And notice that each paragraph has a theme. In case those themes are unclear, there’s a quick breakdown on the next page.

HIKING

PROMPT 8: What is the one thing that you think sets you apart from other candidates applying to the Univ. of California?

Notice the author's already answered the prompt two sentences into the essay, which is great. He has also made an uncommon connection, linking hiking to history.

I am a history nerd, to the point where I would be that guy reading history textbooks for fun. However, reading about history can only go so far. Through Boy Scouts, I have been able to arrange and lead Historical Trail hikes, giving myself and my troop first hand perspectives on what it felt like to sleep at Valley Forge in the winter, or what the walk up Breed's Hill along Boston's Freedom Trail is really like. Naturally, I became the troop "story-teller" along these hikes, adding my own tidbits of information such as pointing out Eisenhower's five-star general flag waving from his personal putting green in Gettysburg, or how Spuyten Duyvil was perhaps named following one of the first reported shark attacks in America.

"Geeky language" – the history version

Organizing these historical hikes has also given me the opportunity to teach younger Scouts about various Scouting skills, from orienteering (using a map and compass) to conservation principles like Leave-No-Trace. My troop engages in trail maintenance projects, and we actively monitor a trail we adopted from the NY/NJ Trail Conference.

Second uncommon connection: hiking helps the author teach and connect with others

Third uncommon connection: hiking connects him to the environment (oh, and his academic studies—fourth connection!)

I especially relished the opportunity to apply what I had learned in AP Biology towards actually helping preserve the environment. It is one thing to learn about pollution, global warming, and invasive species in a classroom; it is another thing entirely to see the biodiversity of an ecosystem quickly succumb to man-made pressures.

Finally, hiking with the Boy Scouts has given me the chance to help others experience the beauty of the outdoors. On a recent hike, a new Scout, Louis, confided in me how disconnected he felt away from his video games. I stayed with Louis for the remainder of the hike and pointed out everything from milkweed stalks to coyote scat. After the hike, Louis was exhausted but had a glimmer of excitement towards the environment around him, and could even tell the difference between poison ivy and Virginia creeper. Louis is currently one of my troop's most active younger Scouts.

Final paragraph supports what's come before: hiking has led him to become an environmentalist and teacher

When I'm hiking, I'm not merely a hiker; I'm a historian, a conservationist, and a teacher all in one.

347 words

Ending wraps it all up neatly (and this is key) using words he hasn't already used. Normally I don't care much for "restate your thesis" conclusions, but this works, I think, because he has saved his complete thesis for the final line.

How to Write This Type of Essay

So far we've discussed three ways to brainstorm a Montage/Extracurricular essay.

Good news: any of these could work for Prompt 8. How? Like this:

1. **The Uncommon Connection (UC) Game**

Find several uncommon qualities or values that connect to your topic and focus on one quality/value per paragraph (Example: the santur has helped me connect with my culture and Persian heritage (one paragraph), serves as a tool for social change (another paragraph), and connects me to my father and grandfather (another paragraph).)

Or you might consider using...

2. **The Best Extracurricular Activity Brainstorm I've Ever Seen (BEABIES)**

Create a chart with four columns labeled:

- a. What I did
- b. Problems I solved
- c. Lessons learned/Values gained and
- d. Impact I had

Choose the two most impressive, and emphasize those in your essay.

Or you might opt for...

5. **The Elon Musk Exercise**

Create a chart with six columns labeled:

- a. The Problem/Challenge
- b. Raise the Stakes/Why now?
- c. Promised land/Vision
- d. What I/We did
- e. My specific role
- f. Impact/Lessons/Values

For what it's worth, the author of the "Hiking" essay used the first approach: he brainstormed a few uncommon connections, considered what order he'd discuss them, then started writing. Six drafts later he was done.

Tip: Brainstorm 4-6 uncommon connections (i.e. more than you'll need in the essay), if you can, and try writing a paragraph on each. Ultimately you'll probably choose just three (whichever three turn out best), but it can't hurt to try for more, and you may end up combining two connections in a single paragraph.

That's it! If you've stayed with me this far, it's time to get started. So pick a topic, pick a structure, and get brainstorming!

THE "FEELINGS AND NEEDS" EXERCISE

Adapted from an exercise created by Nonviolent Communication Expert LaShelle Lowe-Chardé (<http://www.wiseheartpdx.org>).

When I saw/heard/experienced... _____
(What event, positive or negative, did you experience?)

The effects were... _____
(What were the external repercussions of the challenge?)

I felt _____
(Choose 2-3 emotions from the list below)

Because I needed... _____

Delighted

Joyful
Happy
Amused
Adventurous
Blissful
Elated

Thankful

Appreciative
Moved
Touched
Tender
Expansive
Grateful

Excited

Enthusiastic
Overjoyed
Fervent
Giddy
Eager
Ecstatic
Thrilled

Satisfied

Fulfilled
Gratified

Interested

Curious
Absorbed

Healthy

Empowered
Alive
Robust

Relaxed

Relieved
Rested
Mellow
At ease
Light

Content

Cheerful
Glad
Comfortable
Pleased

Friendly

Affectionate
Loving
Passionate

Energetic

Exhilarated
Exuberant
Vigorous

Alert

Focused
Awake
Clearheaded

Peaceful

Tranquil
Serene
Calm

Confident

Secure
Safe
Hopeful

Scared

Apprehensive
Dread
Worried
Panicky
Frightened
Vulnerable

Nervous

Jittery
Anxious
Restless
Vulnerable

Tense

Cranky
Stiff
Stressed
Overwhelmed
Agitated
Aggravated

Hurt

Pain
Agony
Anguish
Heartbroken
Lonely

*Depressed

Disconnected
Detached
Despondent
Dejected
Bored

Tired

Burnt Out
Exhausted
Lethargic

*Angry

*Furious
*Rage
*Irate
*Resentful
Irritated

Frustrated

Disappointed
Discouraged
Disheartened
Impatient

Shocked

Disturbed
Stunned
Alarmed
Appalled
Concerned
Horried

Sad

Grief
Despair
Gloomy
Sullen
Downhearted
Hopeless

Torn

Ambivalent
Confused
Puzzled

Jealous

Envious
*Bitter

Embarrassed

*Ashamed
Contrite
*Guilty

Intimacy

Empathy
Connection
Affection
Warmth
Love
Understanding
Acceptance
Caring
Bonding
Compassion
Communion
Divine Union
Sexuality

Autonomy

Choice
Freedom
Spontaneity
Independence
Respect
Honor

Security

Predictability
Consistency
Stability
Trust
Reassurance

Partnership

Mutuality
Friendship
Companionship
Support
Collaboration
Belonging
Community
Consideration
Seen/heard
Appreciation

Purpose

Competence
Contribution
Efficiency
Growth
Learning
Challenge
Discovery

Order

Structure
Clarity
Focus
Information

Celebration

Mourning
Aliveness
Humor
Beauty
Play
Creativity
Joy

Honesty

Integrity
Authenticity
Wholeness
Fairness

Peace

Groundedness
Hope
Healing
Harmony

Nurturing

Food/Water
Rest/Sleep
Safety
Shelter

* These are alarm feelings letting you know that judgments and "shoulds" are in your thoughts and you are disconnected from needs.

WHAT DID I DO ABOUT IT?

To meet the need(s) just mentioned, I... _____
(What did* you do? Example: I learned time management.)

*If you're still in process (i.e. haven't done anything yet) what could you do to meet those needs?

As a result, I developed... _____
(What values did* you develop? Choose 2-3 from below.)

*Again, if you haven't done that thing yet, what values do you anticipate developing?

WHAT DID I LEARN?

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> community | <input type="checkbox"/> passion | <input type="checkbox"/> leadership |
| <input type="checkbox"/> inspiration | <input type="checkbox"/> cooperation | <input type="checkbox"/> helping others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> money | <input type="checkbox"/> affection | <input type="checkbox"/> influence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> intellectual | <input type="checkbox"/> wisdom | <input type="checkbox"/> wit |
| <input type="checkbox"/> status | <input type="checkbox"/> knowledge | <input type="checkbox"/> success |
| <input type="checkbox"/> financial gain | <input type="checkbox"/> growth | <input type="checkbox"/> patience |
| <input type="checkbox"/> laughter | <input type="checkbox"/> expertise | <input type="checkbox"/> listening |
| <input type="checkbox"/> serenity | <input type="checkbox"/> order | <input type="checkbox"/> diversity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> physical challenge | <input type="checkbox"/> privacy | <input type="checkbox"/> love |
| <input type="checkbox"/> responsibility | <input type="checkbox"/> self expression | <input type="checkbox"/> fast-paced work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> competition | <input type="checkbox"/> stability | <input type="checkbox"/> nutrition |
| <input type="checkbox"/> career | <input type="checkbox"/> art | <input type="checkbox"/> competence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fame | <input type="checkbox"/> autonomy | <input type="checkbox"/> practicality |
| <input type="checkbox"/> working with others | <input type="checkbox"/> risk | <input type="checkbox"/> creativity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> freedom | <input type="checkbox"/> balance | <input type="checkbox"/> excitement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> security | <input type="checkbox"/> self-discipline | <input type="checkbox"/> collaboration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> strength | <input type="checkbox"/> courage | <input type="checkbox"/> social change |
| <input type="checkbox"/> self-control | <input type="checkbox"/> family | <input type="checkbox"/> beauty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> hunger | <input type="checkbox"/> empathy | <input type="checkbox"/> ecological awareness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> personal development | <input type="checkbox"/> working alone | <input type="checkbox"/> quality relationships |
| <input type="checkbox"/> trust | <input type="checkbox"/> humility | <input type="checkbox"/> travel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> faith | <input type="checkbox"/> efficiency | <input type="checkbox"/> decisiveness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> involvement | <input type="checkbox"/> intensity | <input type="checkbox"/> curiosity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> adventure | <input type="checkbox"/> health and fitness | <input type="checkbox"/> spirituality |
| <input type="checkbox"/> vulnerability | <input type="checkbox"/> meaningful work | <input type="checkbox"/> loyalty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> adaptability | <input type="checkbox"/> my country | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> friendship | <input type="checkbox"/> music | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> excellence | <input type="checkbox"/> truth | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> job tranquility | <input type="checkbox"/> resourcefulness | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> power | <input type="checkbox"/> challenges | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

SESSION 3

ETHAN WORKSHOPS YOUR ESSAYS LIVE

Revising Your Essay in 5 Steps

So I figured something out recently. I was looking back at a couple of my favorite student essays and I realized that the structure of a couple of those essays is ridiculously sound. Rock solid. And not only is it rock solid, it's teachable. Take a look at this essay, for example:

Shared with permission of student author, P.N.:

As a kid I was always curious. I was unafraid to ask questions and didn't worry how dumb they would make me sound. In second grade I enrolled in a summer science program and built a solar-powered oven that baked real cookies. I remember obsessing over the smallest details: Should I paint the oven black to absorb more heat? What about its shape? A spherical shape would allow for more volume, but would it trap heat as well as conventional rectangular ovens? Even then I was obsessed with the details of design.

And it didn't stop in second grade.

A few years later I designed my first pair of shoes, working for hours to perfect each detail, including whether the laces should be mineral white or diamond white. Even then I sensed that minor differences in tonality could make a huge impact and that different colors could evoke different responses.

In high school I moved on to more advanced projects, teaching myself how to take apart, repair, and customize cell phones. Whether I was adjusting the flex cords that connect the IPS LCD to the iPhone motherboard, or replacing the vibrator motor, I loved discovering the many engineering feats Apple overcame in its efforts to combine form with function.

And once I obtained my driver's license, I began working on cars. Many nights you'll find me in the garage replacing standard chrome trim with an elegant piano black finish or changing the threads on the stitching of the seats to add a personal touch, as I believe a few small changes can transform a generic product into a personalized work of art.

My love of details applies to my schoolwork too.

I'm the math geek who marvels at the fundamental theorems of Calculus, or who sees beauty in $A=(s-a)(s-b)(s-c)^{(1/2)}$. Again, it's in the details: one bracket off or one digit missing and the whole equation collapses. And details are more than details, they can mean the difference between negative and positive infinity, an impossible range of solutions.

I also love sharing this appreciation with others and have taken it upon myself to personally eradicate mathonumophobicconfundosis, my Calculus teacher's term for "extreme fear of Math." A small group of other students and I have devoted our after-school time to tutoring our peers in everything from Pre-Algebra to AP Calculus B/C and I believe my fluency in Hebrew and Farsi has helped me connect with some of my school's Israeli and Iranian students. There's nothing better than seeing a student solve a difficult problem without me saying anything.

You probably think I want to be a designer. Or perhaps an engineer?

Wrong. Well, kind of.

Actually, I want to study Endodontics, which is (I'll save you the Wikipedia look-up) a branch of dentistry that deals with the tooth pulp and the tissues surrounding the root of a tooth. As an Endodontist, I'll be working to repair damaged teeth by performing precision root canals and

implementing dental crowns. Sound exciting? It is to me.

The fact is, it's not unlike the work I've been doing repairing cellphone circuits and modifying cars, though there is one small difference. In the future I'll still be working to repair machines, but this machine is one of the most sophisticated machines ever created: the human body. Here, my obsession with details will be as crucial as ever. A one millimeter difference can mean the difference between a successful root canal and a lawsuit.

The question is: will the toothbrushes I hand out be mineral white or diamond white?

You might notice the first lines are all in bold. Why? Because if you just read those lines in bold the essay still makes sense. It's like a mini-essay. Kind of awesome.

How can this information help you write a better essay? Do this:

1. **Go through your essay and highlight the first lines of each paragraph in bold** (as I've done above). Then,
2. **Read the bolded lines aloud.** (Side note: I once read that Chekhov used to read all his work aloud to his wife to check for sense and errors—it's a great practice. Even if you have no wife.)

As you read, you'll probably notice that some parts make sense and some parts don't. So

3. **Write a new outline in which all the lines flow together.** Like a mini version of your essay. Essentially, what you'll be writing is the skeleton of the essay. (Think of the lines that follow in each paragraph as the meat that fleshes out the essay. Kind of a gross image but whatever.)

IMPORTANT NOTE: the new outline that you create does not have to precisely reflect what's currently in your essay—it can be aspirational, in other words, what you want the paragraphs to say. Once you've written this new outline, paste the bolded lines onto a brand new blank document and

4. **Rewrite your paragraphs so that each paragraph fleshes out the topic sentence.** This may not sound like a very romantic/creative way of writing an essay, but it works. It'll also help you clarify what you're trying to say. "Foggy writing is foggy thinking," one of my writing teachers used to say.

And why do I suggest you paste the new outline onto a new document and start over? Because, in short, it'll take longer if you don't. Chances are you'll have fallen in love with some old way that you've phrased something but, once you've written the new outline, that old way of phrasing it is dead. And if you're trying to create a new and living thing out of old, dead parts, you're no better than Dr. Frankenstein. And we all know what happened to him.

5. **Step away from the essay for at least 30 minutes.** Go for a walk, get something to eat, do something else to clear your mind. Come back to it and read it aloud. When you come back:
 - a. Put the first sentence of each paragraph in bold.
 - b. Read them aloud in order to see if they tell a very short version of your essay. (If not, rewrite them.) If they do,
 - c. Read the whole essay aloud, checking to see if what's in each paragraph supports the essay in bold.

If so, you should have a very solid revision, maybe even one that's ready for feedback.

Here's [a really lovely piece of writing](#) from my friend Chris that demonstrates how putting your first lines in bold can help the reader follow your story.

SESSION 4

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

The Great Personal Insight Question (PIQ) Test

What are the four qualities of a great UC personal insight question? And what techniques can you use to bring each of them into your essay? That's what this session is for.

First, here are the four elements of a great UC personal insight question:

1. Core values
2. Insight
3. Craft
4. Wow factor

1. Core values

- a. Can you name at least 3-4 of the author's core values?
- b. Do the values represent common or uncommon connections? (See Session 1 for more on this.)
- c. Do you detect a variety of values, or do the values repeat?

- Examples of NOT varied values: hard work, determination, perseverance
- Examples of more varied values: autonomy, resourcefulness, healthy boundaries, diversity

2. Insight

- a. Can you identify at least 3-5 "so what" moments of insight in the essay?
- b. Are these moments kind of predictable, or are they truly illuminating?

3. Craft

- a. Do the ideas in the essay connect in a way that is logical, but not too obvious (aka boring)?
- b. Can you tell that the essay represents a series of carefully considered choices and revisions?
- c. Is it interesting and succinct throughout? If not, where do you lose interest?

4. Wow factor

This may be done through any or all of the means above, but it can also come from demonstrating that the student has made the most of his/her opportunities.

For an example that demonstrates core values, insight, craft, and a wow factor, check out the Hiking essay once more:

Hiking

I am a history nerd, to the point where I would be that guy reading history textbooks for fun. However, reading about history can only go so far. Through Boy Scouts, I have been able to arrange and lead Historical Trail hikes, giving myself and my troop first hand perspectives on what it felt like to sleep at Valley Forge in the winter, or what the walk up Breed's Hill along Boston's Freedom Trail is really like. Naturally, I became the troop "story-teller" along these hikes, adding my own tidbits of information such as pointing out Eisenhower's five-star general flag waving from his personal putting green in Gettysburg, or how Spuyten Duyvil was perhaps named following one of the first reported shark attacks in America.

Organizing these historical hikes has also given me the opportunity to teach younger Scouts about various Scouting skills, from orienteering (using a map and compass) to conservation principles like Leave-No-Trace. My troop engages in trail maintenance projects, and we actively monitor a trail we adopted from the NY/NJ Trail Conference.

I especially relished the opportunity to apply what I had learned in AP Biology towards actually helping preserve the environment. It is one thing to learn about pollution, global warming, and invasive species in a classroom; it is another thing entirely to see the biodiversity of an ecosystem quickly succumb to man-made pressures.

Finally, hiking with the Boy Scouts has given me the chance to help others experience the beauty of the outdoors. On a recent hike, a new Scout, Louis, confided in me how disconnected he felt away from his video games. I stayed with Louis for the remainder of the hike and pointed out everything from milkweed stalks to coyote scat. After the hike, Louis was exhausted but had a glimmer of excitement towards the environment around him, and could even tell the difference between poison ivy and Virginia creeper. Louis is currently one of my troop's most active younger Scouts.

When I'm hiking, I'm not merely a hiker; I'm a historian, a conservationist, and a teacher all in one.

347 words

Analysis:

Note that this essay could have worked for UC prompts 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, and (with a little tweaking) 6. In this sense, it has great range. It also demonstrates:

Core values: history, intellectual engagement, teaching, leadership, nature

Insight: Each paragraph makes an unusual connection that surprises me.

Craft: The ideas connect effortlessly (for evidence of this, read the first sentence of each paragraph aloud) and the details bring the story to life in a dynamic way (Spuyten Duyvil, Leave-No-Trace, Virginia creeper).

Wow factor: The combination of core values, insight and craft make this a wow essay for me. But most of all it is the variety of values that I'm impressed by—and it's the reason that a longer version of this essay worked well for this student's Common App main personal statement.