

Admission Essays



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Essay writing tips:

- Should NOT be a 5 paragraph essay with an introduction and conclusion
 - You are working with a limited word count, so dive right into the meat of your essay
 - Use a hook to grab the reader in your first few sentences
- Should be very personal
 - If you're talking about your hero, make sure that you're talking about how they've impacted YOU rather than just telling their story
 - Let the reader really get to know your background and your passions – there isn't a right topic for your essay
 - You can write about a family vacation, your childhood dollhouse, your favorite piece of art, etc.
 - Don't butter up the college by writing your essay about their school colors
- Show NOT tell
 - Showing: Appeal to the senses – eyes, ears, mouth, nose, or skin
 - Telling: General statements that tell the reader what to experience rather than making them feel for themselves
- Specificity is key
 - Avoid making general statements. Instead, give interesting details that describe specific people, places, and things
- Do NOT treat your essay like a résumé
 - There's no need to mention extracurriculars or the AP courses you've taken – the admissions office will read those things elsewhere in your application
- Make yourself look good in comparison to other applicants
 - If an essay is optional, do it. If an essay says 400-600 words, make sure your essay is closer to 600 words than 400. Otherwise, you will immediately appear to have put less effort into your application than the person who submitted the optional essay and used the full word count
- Try a free-write to get warmed up (adapted from NACAC):
 - The best day of my life was...
 - The worst day of my life was...
 - The most important thing about me is ...
 - If I could change one thing about my life, it would be...
 - If my life were a movie, the pivotal scene would occur when
 - People say we learn from mistakes. I really messed up when ...
 - I remember this one time I could NOT keep my mouth shut! I ...
 - When we're kids, we learn right from wrong. One wrong people seemed not to have learned yet is ...
 - I'm an inventor. I'm going to invent...
 - If I ruled the world, I would change ...
 - I got my first taste of adulthood when
 - People think I'm lying when I tell them I spend so much time

Free assistance is available to help you brainstorm and edit your college essays:

- Scholarship Fund of Alexandria:
 - Ms. Feldman – Room A-115 (available 8am – 4:30pm during school year and 9am – 3:30pm all summer)
 - margaret.feldman@acps.k12.va.us
- College & Career Center:
 - Ms. Morris – Room A-114 (available 8am – 4pm during school year)
 - stacy.morris@acps.k12.va.us
- Essay Mom (local writing coach):
 - Ms. Schwarz (summer essay writing workshops)
 - kschwarz109@gmail.com

If you are completing the Common App, you will respond to one of the seven prompts below:

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Most colleges have supplement essays in addition to the Common App prompt (and not every college uses the Common App)

- Colleges can select their own supplement prompt(s), for example:
 - What work of art, music, science, mathematics, or literature has surprised, unsettled, or challenged you, and in what way? (UVA)
 - Historians write that Martha Washington was George Washington's sounding board and closest confidant. Reflect on a significant challenge you have encountered during your high school career. Tell us about the person (mentor, family member, friend, coach, teacher, etc.) who provides support, advice, and wisdom to you in times of difficulty.(GW)
 - Our motto is Ut Prosim (That I May Serve). How is service to others important in your life? (VT)
- It's a good idea to see if some of your colleges have similar prompts before you get started writing. That way you can try to reuse an essay for more than one school
- A great essay will go through rounds of edits before it is truly complete. Get started with your essays now so that you can leave time for feedback & revisions
- *Be sure to give at least 5 business days for someone to review your essay!*