

STILL VALUABLE Advice for Students on Topics for the *2013* Common App Essays

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College advisor Alice Kleeman joins us today in our ongoing series on the changes to the Common Application with some excellent guidance for students and how to think about the new essay prompts and an entertaining look back on some of the essays that have been favorites in her twenty years advising students.

The five prompts that will appear on the “new or 2013” Common Application should allow for nearly any topic you might choose. Below are some suggestions for academic, extracurricular, and personal topics that might fit neatly into a response for each prompt. Of course, these are just suggestions, designed to jumpstart your thinking, provide a gentle nudge if you feel stumped, and to help you decide which prompt might provide the best opportunity for you to show the admission office who you are. Your response to any college-essay prompt should be entirely personal and one that only you could write; these examples are just to get your essay juices flowing!

Essay Prompt One:

Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Key Words:

“background,” “story,” “identity,” “incomplete without”

Possible topics:

ACADEMIC:

- Have you moved from one school to another in order to pursue greater academic opportunities?
- Has your pursuit of academics been influenced by your parents’ lack of formal education?
- Is your dedication to a particular academic area shaped by your life experiences (for example, has your interest in medicine stemmed from growing up with a sibling with chronic illness?)?

EXTRACURRICULAR:

- Is your identity entirely tied up in the music you’ve been composing and playing since you were five?
- Has your ethnic background led you to participate deeply and fully in the dance, spiritual, or culinary traditions of your culture?
- Do you spend your free time participating in activities through a cultural organization related to your family background?

PERSONAL:

- Do you come from a bicultural family? Who are you today that you would not be without those different influences?
- Have you grown up in a family that has been challenged by poverty, illness, or other obstacles? How has this influenced your identity?

- Have your extended family’s values been transmitted to you in a unique and particularly powerful way over the years?

Essay Prompt Two:

Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?

Key words:

“incident,” “failure,” “effect on you,” “lessons learned”

If you choose this prompt, after describing the “failure,” be sure to show the positive changes that emerged from the situation!

Possible topics:

ACADEMIC:

- Did you challenge yourself in an academic area that is not usually your forte, and find that it didn’t go the way you hoped it might?
- Did you seek a summer internship in an academic area you thought you’d like to explore more deeply, and find that you weren’t engaged in the way you wished?
- Have you submitted your writing, art, or lab results to a professional journal for publication, and received your first rejection letter? Or have you received what seemed to be negative feedback from a teacher and had to approach the subject in a new way?

EXTRACURRICULAR:

- Did you believe that the serious injury you experienced in your sophomore year would derail your athletic career? Or did you fail to make the team in your sport of choice?
- Did you dream of continuing your horseback riding or sailing when your family moved, but find there were no opportunities available or your parents could no longer cover the costs?
- Did it seem like a great idea for you to follow in the footsteps of an older sibling and participate in his or her activities of choice, but then learn it didn’t work out so well for you?

PERSONAL:

- Did you challenge yourself to a resolution, goal, or personal promise, and find you weren’t able to stick with it?
- Did you make an effort to reach out to people you hoped would become your friends, only to find they didn’t welcome you?
- Have you ever taken a close look at your character traits and personal qualities and hoped to make fundamental changes, but then realized those traits and qualities were inextricably tied to who you are?

Essay Prompt Three:

Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

Key words:

“challenged,” “belief or idea,” “prompted,” “same decision”

Possible topics:

ACADEMIC:

- Did you decide to offer a different-from-the-accepted and possibly unpopular perspective in your English or history class? Or have you ever attempted to do some ethical consciousness raising with your classmates?
- Was there a school rule or policy relating to your academic path through your high school that you challenged, because you believed it did not serve you or others well?
- Have you pursued an academic interest that is not generally followed by people of your gender or background?

EXTRACURRICULAR:

- When you learned that certain students were being bullied or excluded from an activity at your school, did you tackle the inequity?
- Were you ever told by a coach or activity director that you would not be successful in a particular activity, yet you chose to pursue it?
- Have your parents felt you couldn't handle a new passion on top of your other commitments, leading you to seek ways to manage your time so you could prove your ability to balance your busy schedule?

PERSONAL:

- Have you begun to question the precepts of your religious or cultural upbringing?
- Are you resisting the pressure in your community to do it all—and do it all perfectly—and instead are seeking balance in your life?
- Have you ever made a well-thought-out effort to convince your parents to give you more independence and freedom?

Essay Prompt Four:

Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?

Key words:

place or environment,” “content,” “do or experience,” “meaningful”

Possible topics:

ACADEMIC:

- Has a cozy corner of the local bookstore or school library become your happy place?
- Have you made the chemistry lab your home away from home?
- Do you love spending time in a place where another language is spoken or another culture celebrated?

EXTRACURRICULAR:

- Is the badminton court, robotics workshop, or practice hall for your youth orchestra the place where you feel most in your element?
- Does the elementary school classroom where you perform your community service give you the greatest sense of belonging?
- Do you feel your strongest sense of ownership at work, whether it's the ice-cream parlor, hardware store, or coffee shop?

PERSONAL:

- Is there a leafy tree in your backyard that you gravitate to when you want to read and think?
- Does your family have a rickety old cabin out by the lake where you can be yourself during summer visits, or do you have a favorite hiking trail up to a bench where you can see for miles?
- Have you tailored your bedroom to reflect your personality and suit your every need so it's the one place where you can be the essential you?

Essay Prompt Five:

Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Key words:

“accomplishment/event,” “formal/informal,” “transition to adulthood,” “culture, community, family”

Possible topics:

ACADEMIC:

- Did you make your government and economics education come alive by registering to vote on your 18th birthday?
- Have you taken a class on a college campus, and lived the life of a college student during that time, or taken an internship where you've worked as an equal with a group of adults?
- Did you become a U.S. citizen and experience studying for and taking the test, and the ceremony that goes along with that milestone?

EXTRACURRICULAR:

- Has your talent allowed you to participate at such a high level that your teammates, band-mates, or co-workers are all adults, and they treat you as such?
- Has one of your activities taken you out of your own community, so you learned to travel and cope with new situations on your own?

- Did you come up with the funding for your most meaningful activity on your own, so you've assumed a heightened level of adult responsibility and appreciated the activity all the more for your independence in making it happen?

PERSONAL:

- Does your family rely on you for adult responsibilities such as childcare for siblings, translation, transportation, or housework?
- Have you taken on financial responsibilities to help support your family?
- Do you come from a single-parent family where you play a role as the man/woman of the house, with all its attendant responsibilities?

SOME OF MY FAVORITE COLLEGE ESSAYS

As I noted earlier, your response to any college-essay prompt should be entirely personal. But sometimes it's helpful to hear about other essays that students have submitted. Do remember, though, that the most important thing about the essay is that it should be something only you could write! Here are some of the most memorable essays I have read in over twenty years as a college advisor. You'll see that they paint a vivid and personal picture of the writer.

My all-time favorite college essay was a student's account of his work at the local hardware store, and what it meant to him to take care of people's basic home-and-garden needs. It was simple and straightforward; I knew him well by the time I finished reading the essay.

A similar topic, another student's after-school job, began, "Working in a library today is not for the faint of heart." Really? I can't wait to know why! An essay that began with "I am amazed by what I have learned about myself from children" was a superb and telling little gem about an unexpected experience with young children already feeling academic pressure. Another great essay began with, "It is strange to be grateful for a fractured skull." Don't you want to read on?

Another student wrote about her love of ... triangles! Yet another focused on the student's life-long love of reading. A lover of art history who volunteered at the Rodin Sculpture Garden began her essay, "If I'm not at school or at home, I'm likely to be found working behind the gates of hell." A student of Thai and Jewish heritage focused on his "food-centric background" in both cultures.

And finally, who could resist an essay (about a student's family forays into intellectual curiosity and experimentation) that began, "The baking sheet slides into the oven, pushed by my mother's careful hands—and on it rest a dozen wadded-up balls of Kleenex, half fresh, half used." All of the above essays could fit neatly into one or another of the Common App prompts!

Alice Kleeman has served as the college advisor for 18 years in the College and Career Center of Menlo-Atherton High School, a public high school of 2,000 students in the San Francisco Bay Area. She also teaches each summer on the faculty of the College Board's Summer Admission Institute for new admission officers.

Previous posts on the Common Application changes include a [feature discussing the new prompts and word-limits](#), and Q&A's with [Common Application Director of Outreach Scott Anderson](#); [Common App Outreach Advisory Committee member Ralph Figueroa](#), Dean of College Guidance at Albuquerque Academy; [Wayne Locust and Nathan Fuerst from Admissions at University of Connecticut](#); and [Vanderbilt University's Dean of Admission Douglas Christiansen](#). Next up: our Q&A with Jeannine Lalonde, Senior Assistant Dean of Admission at University of Virginia.