

2025–2026 Common App essay prompts

Students will see two changes to the optional “Additional information” questions as of August 1, 2025.

- The current “Community disruption” question will be updated to a “Challenges and circumstances” question. The new question language will expand to capture a broader range of impacts students may experience. The word/character limit will remain the same (first-year app 250 words max, transfer app 1250 characters max).
- The “Additional information” question word/character limit will be reduced. The first-year app limit will be reduced from 650 to 300 words max. The transfer app limit will be reduced from 3500 to 1500 characters max.

Here is the full set of essay prompts for 2025–2026.

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. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
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

This is the updated “Challenges and circumstances” question language students will see beginning August 1, 2025

Sometimes a student's application and achievements may be impacted by challenges or other circumstances. This could involve:

- Access to a safe and quiet study space
- Access to reliable technology and internet
- Community disruption (violence, protests, teacher strikes, etc.)
- Discrimination
- Family disruptions (divorce, incarceration, job loss, health, loss of a family member, addiction, etc.)
- Family or other obligations (care-taking, financial support, etc.)
- Housing instability, displacement, or homelessness
- Military deployment or activation
- Natural disasters
- Physical health and mental well-being
- War, conflict, or other hardships

If you're comfortable sharing, this information can help colleges better understand the context of your application. Colleges may use this information to provide you and your fellow students with support and resources.

Would you like to share any details about challenges or other circumstances you've experienced?*

() Yes

() No

Please describe the challenges or circumstances and how they have impacted you.

The College Essay Advisor's How to Approach the 2025-26 Common App Essay Prompts

How To Write Common App Prompt #1: The Background Essay

PROMPT #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.

The Common App's Prompt #1 is the Old Faithful of essay questions. It's been around for years and offers all the flexibility an applicant could ask for from a prompt, with just enough direction to get those creative fountains flowing. Focus on the key words, "background," "identity," "interest," and "talent," and use them as launch points for your brainstorming. What about your history, personality, hobbies, or accomplishments might be worth highlighting for an admissions officer? It can be something as small as seeing an episode of a television show (are you living life in the Upside Down?) or as large as the struggle of moving to a foreign country (especially if you had to leave behind grandma's cooking). The most important thing to consider for this prompt is that your subject and/or perspective is dynamic and specific to you and who you are and no one else.

Some questions to ask yourself as you brainstorm:

- What about my history or background sets me apart from my peers?
- How do I define myself? How do the people who are closest to me define me?
- What have I achieved that has been integral in molding my character and ambitions?
- What, in my seventeen years on this earth, has helped shape the person I am today?

And some examples to consider:

- Has your family's love of food and your resultant adventurous tastes and culinary curiosity allowed you to connect with cultures from around the world?
- Does your crazy, dyed-blue hair define you?
- Did going to a Picasso exhibit inspire you to start an art collection that has since expanded beyond the borders of your bedroom?
- Have your yearly trips to see your extended family in China revealed something to you about your parents' ability to overcome challenges and the work ethic you have absorbed as a result?

- What are the challenges and rewards of having same-sex parents? Or of being raised by your siblings? Or of being part of a family made up of stepsisters and stepbrothers?

Overall, this prompt is what we at College Essay Advisors call a “choose-your-own-adventure” prompt. It has historically served as a fabulous catch-all for subjects that don’t fit within the confines of the other prompt options. A recent addition to the Common App’s prompt selection now offers even more freedom to applicants (more on that later), but students should still think of Prompt #1 as a topic of immense choice, reeled in by a few helpful guidelines.

How To Write Common App Prompt #2: The Setback Essay

PROMPT #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?

We have always believed that essays about overcoming obstacles are most effective when they focus more on solutions than problems. Accordingly, Prompt #2 essays should be predominantly filled with a student’s response, outlook, and demeanor when presented with one of life’s many hurdles, rather than a detailed account of the hurdle itself. Applicants should aim to showcase qualities like resilience, determination, and humility. The obstacles you choose to explore can vary widely in nature, especially with the recent additions that allow students to explore challenges and setbacks in addition to failures. They can be as serious as being tormented by bullies, as ingrained as the financial issues that have plagued your family for years, or as seemingly pedestrian as a mistake that costs you a tip while waiting tables. While the possibilities are almost endless, students should be careful not to choose challenges that may seem trite (the inability to achieve an A on an exam and/or secure tickets to that BTS concert) or that illustrate a lapse in good judgment (that time you crashed your car or ate 15 bags of Cheetos in one sitting). Still, if you can isolate an incident of trial in your life and illustrate how you learned from it, this can be a rewarding prompt to explore.

Some key questions to consider:

- How do you deal with hardship?
- What qualifies as a challenge or setback in your life and world?
- Are you the kind of person who can rebound and turn every experience, good or bad, into one from which you can learn something? What experiences might illustrate this quality?

- What have been some of the major challenges you've encountered in your life? And was there a silver lining?

And a few examples to think about:

- Has a lifelong battle with stuttering ultimately increased your overall confidence and allowed you to participate in social activities and public forums without self-judgment?
- Did a parent's fragile health situation challenge you to take on more responsibilities than the average teenager?
- Did a series of setbacks on your road to becoming a child actor introduce you to screenwriting, your professional goal and biggest passion?
- Did your failure to follow directions lead you to a botched home science experiment (root beer explosion!) and an appreciation for a balance of creativity and planned procedure?

Overall, try to keep these stories as positive as possible. Remember, these essays are not contemplative musings on your toughest times or reflections on the hiccups that populate everyday life (though these things can certainly be touched upon); they are about overcoming obstacles and refusing to submit to life's greatest challenges.

How To Write Common App Prompt #3: The Challenge Essay

PROMPT #3: Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

This remains one of the most challenging prompts of the Common App's selection, even though it has become slightly friendlier with the addition of the option to discuss a time you *questioned* an idea instead of challenged one. This prompt requires a student to speak passionately about beliefs and ideology, which are often onerous subjects that can be difficult to mold into compact stories. It can be one of the hardest questions to steer in a positive, productive direction without traveling into preachy, overly didactic territory. This is also a more precarious prompt than most in that students need to carefully assess the risks of espousing beliefs that might be polarizing for the readers of their applications.

That said, a response to this prompt can be incisive and deeply personal, as it was for a student who stood up to her parents' old-fashioned outlook on feminism. Applicants who can articulate their thoughts and feelings while showcasing malleability and willingness to thoughtfully consider the ideas of others will likely stand out as valuable additions to any campus. If this prompt jumps out at you because you have a very specific story to tell or opinion to voice, run with it!

Consider these questions as you brainstorm:

- When has your opinion been unpopular?
- Why are you the kind of person who is willing to stand up for what you believe in?
- What is important to you on a fundamental level of morals and values?
- How passionate are you about the things you believe in?

And here are a few examples for you to ponder:

- Are you openly gay in a strict Catholic school environment? What has that meant for your self-esteem and personal relationships?
- Did you work as an intern on a political campaign caught at the center of a scandal? How did you react?
- Did you challenge the idea of horror as a throw-away genre by executing an extensive research paper on the subject, launching a horror movie club at school, and arranging the most elaborate, best-received haunted house your neighborhood has ever seen?

Your essay does not have to be focused around a fundamentally serious or groundbreaking issue (see the horror genre example above). What matters most when responding to this prompt is that you have strong convictions about the belief or idea you are trying to convey, and that you examine the personal effects of this ethos on your life and world. For this reason, Prompt #3 can be a great vehicle for showcasing your consideration, persuasive skills, and passions to admissions.

How To Write Common App Prompt #4: The Gratitude Essay

PROMPT #4: Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?

We love Prompt #4, which asks students to talk about a time when they felt gratitude. So many of the Common App prompts set students up to talk about what they do for others. Just as important, however, is how applicants react and respond when they are the recipients of something meaningful themselves. Gratitude is quickly becoming a quality individuals are encouraged to connect to and reflect on regularly, hence the popularity of gratitude journals and exercises. (Brainstorming method alert!) This question is meant to offer students the opportunity to reflect on the role gratitude plays in their lives, as well as how the practice of giving thanks and acknowledging life's gifts motivates and inspires them.

Students should think about times when they have felt acknowledged, heard, and seen. Moments when they have felt that swelling in their chest, as their heart grows three sizes. Think creatively about what you appreciate in your life. It can be a physical gift, an action, or even just a set of feelings projected in your direction. You can be intimately familiar with the person who has inspired your gratitude, or reflect on the actions of a near stranger or even a public figure who has impacted your life for the better. Just remember that this

essay needs to focus on how you process, appreciate and draw inspiration from the action of others, so make sure your response is focused on YOU. Ultimately, admissions wants to know more about how you relate to others in the world, and how you repurpose good intentions.

Some questions to ponder:

- How do you like to pay it forward in your daily life?
- How (and why!) do you express gratitude and appreciation?
- What are your favorite random acts of kindness?
- Has anyone ever restored your faith in humanity? How?
- Do you believe in karma? Why?

And examples to use as food for thought:

- Did a kind gesture from a stranger inspire you to keep paying it forward? How do you do so and what's become of your wholesome intentions?
- Have you ever received an unexpected gift from someone? Why was this gift so meaningful to you? How did you express your gratitude?
- Do you feel appreciative of a public figure for the work they have done to raise awareness about issues that are important to you? How do you give back?

It's important that the story you choose to tell is linked to your life and world in a meaningful way. The whole purpose of this exercise is to reveal something valuable about yourself to admissions, so be sure to link the act of kindness you highlight to your passions, actions, or aspirations. And don't forget to detail how this gift affected you then and still motivates you now. Once you've settled into your prompt of choice, following instructions to the fullest and answering all parts of each question are critical.

How To Write Common App Prompt #5: The Accomplishment Essay

PROMPT #5: Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

There are a few things to note when unpacking this prompt. Keep in mind that the words "accomplishment" and "event" leave themselves open to interpretation; thus, an essay inspired by this question can tackle anything from a formal event to a very small occurrence. A formal event or accomplishment might include anything from obvious landmarks like birthdays or weddings to achievements like earning an award or receiving a promotion. More informal examples might include something as simple as meeting a special person in your life, taking a car ride, or eating a particularly meaningful meal. We have often found that smaller, less formal events make for more surprising and memorable

essays; but as with any of the other prompts, as long as you can answer with originality and put a unique twist on your subject matter, all ideas are fair game.

Your reflection on what you have learned and how you have grown will be a source of great insight for admissions, and you want to make sure your essay highlights the intangible qualities that don't show up anywhere else on an application.

Some other things to consider:

- How do you react to periods of transition? What inspires a change in your perspective?
- When have you had a “eureka” moment, and how has it impacted the way you lived your life thereafter?
- What were the moments in life that fundamentally changed you as a person?
- When did you learn something that made you feel more adult, more capable, more grown up?

For example:

- Did your expansion of a handmade stationery hobby into a full-fledged business give you the motivation and wherewithal to combat the effects of a debilitating illness?
- Have you learned to love the football team playback sessions that force you to routinely examine your mistakes, welcome constructive criticism and point yourself toward self-improvement?
- Did a summer-long role as the U.S. President in a mock government and diplomacy exercise bring out leadership skills you never knew you had?
- What did playing bridge at a senior citizens' home each week show you about the value of enjoyment over competition? How did this change the way you interact and connect with others?

The most important things to keep in mind when searching for these moments are the elements of growth, understanding, and transformation. The event, accomplishment, or realization you discuss should be something that helped you understand the world around you through a different, more mature lens.

How To Write Common App Prompt #6: The Passion Essay

PROMPT #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?

One could argue that college is largely about the pursuit of knowledge, so you can imagine it would be quite appealing for an admissions officer to have a meter for your level of self-motivated learning, along with a better understanding of how and why you choose to pay

attention to the things that intrigue you. This is a window into your brain: how you process information, how you seek out new sources of content and inspiration. How resourceful are you when your curiosity is piqued to the fullest? The answer to this prompt should also reveal something to admissions about the breadth or depth of your interests. For example, if you're interested in studying astrophysics, you might choose to discuss a concept that shows how far your exploration of the sciences truly reaches. How consumed are you by this passion you are choosing to pursue academically?

Some key questions to consider:

- What floats your boat? Do you have an appetite for knowledge about something specific? Or, as we asked in the breakdown for Prompt #1: what do you love, and why do you love it?
- What lengths have you gone to in order to acquire new information about or experiences related to a topic of interest?
- How do you typically seek to enrich your knowledge when something appeals to you? Do you have a favorite corner of the library (or internet)? A mentor who is open to answering your burning questions?
- What about the process of learning, especially about subjects that call out to you, is satisfying?

And a few examples to get those wheels turning:

- Did the idea of open-source code inspire you to create a tech startup with a few of your friends? What new projects within the company are you most excited to work on?
- Did getting an internship at an accounting firm inspire you to start each day by checking the markets? Do you participate in a mock trading club that allows you to use the expertise you gather from culling through economic news and analysis online and beyond?
- On any given Sunday morning, could we find you lost in the literature of Kurt Vonnegut or immersed in a collection of stories by Isaac Asimov?
- Have you taught yourself to master the compositions of Mozart and Beethoven and break down the songs of Bruno Mars by ear in your spare time?
- Do you have an obsession with pizza so intense it led you to study the culinary arts and keep a pizza journal that documents the 700+ slices you've consumed thus far? (We know someone who did this—really.) How is pizza-making more scientific and/or artistic than the average person realizes?

Whatever you're into, embrace it. Show your feathers. Let your freak flag fly (within reason, obvs). This prompt is about the pursuit of knowledge and your desire to proactively challenge yourself. Whether you are devouring the classics on your Kindle or nerding out over the perfect cheese for calzone-making, your attachment to a subject may inspire admissions to want to learn more about it...and you.

How To Write Common App Prompt #7: Topic of Your Choice

PROMPT #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.

Feared by some, coveted by others, and legendary in its existence; regardless of where you stand on the issue, this was a newsworthy addition to the 2017-18 Common App prompt choices. For years, students have been treating Prompt #1 (which asks about your background, etc.) as topic of your choice *light*—it wasn't exactly the delicious, full-freedom version students were looking for, but they were able to make it work in a pinch. Applicants around the world likely let out a big exhale when they saw they could still serve up a big scoop of Prompt #7 to admissions in previous seasons. And this year will be no different.

Some questions to consider as you brainstorm, in addition to all of the ones we've posed thus far:

- What do you want admissions to know about you that they wouldn't be able to glean from your transcript, test scores, or teacher recommendations?
- What are the stories that come up over and over again, at the dinner table or in the cafeteria with your friends, that might give admissions some insight into who you are and what is important to you?
- If you had ten minutes alone in a room with an admissions officer, what would you want to talk about or tell him or her about yourself?
- What would you bring to a college campus that no one else would or could?

And a few examples of potential subjects and their related (custom!) prompts:

- Were you born with a congenital eye defect that literally (and metaphorically) affects how you see the world? (*How is your perspective on the world unique?*)
- Do you spend 40 minutes each Friday night tutoring a class of elementary school students in Cambodia? How has that impacted the way you mete out your time and assess your commitments? (*Q: What is the value of 40 minutes?*)
- Did your parents let your older brother choose your name? What was his inspiration? (Please tell us your name is Gaston.) What does your name represent for you? How has it impacted your interactions in the world? (*What's in a name?*)

While being able to write about whatever you wish sounds great in theory, some students find—especially at the beginning of the brainstorming process—that they are debilitated by the “topic of your choice” option because it offers *too much* choice. If that is the case, fear not! Use some of the other prompts as starting points for your brainstorming and free writing journeys. Begin keeping a diary and jot down subjects, events, and memories as they float to the surface. Now that you have read our handy-dandy prompt guide and

understand what admissions is looking for from these prompts, you could very well have a notebook filled with ideas that are ripe for expansion by the time you sit down to write.

So don't worry about having too many ideas, or not having enough ideas, especially at the beginning of the topic selection process. Once you figure out what you'd like to say (and maybe even after you draft the crux of the essay itself), see if your concept fits one of the first six prompts. Trying to tailor your essay to a more specific prompt option may inspire an interesting spin on the story you are trying to tell—one you may not have thought of otherwise. Form influences content. If, after careful consideration, your magic essay topic does not work within the confines of Prompts 1-6, you are in luck. The glorious, all-encompassing Prompt #7 will be here to catch you.