

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: How do I begin to write my essay?

A: If you're reading this, you've already begun. In this guide you'll find some ideas on how to brainstorm and structure your essay. Our favorite exercises are the Essence Objects and Values Exercises.

Q: How long should my essay be?

A: It depends. Your main Common App essay can be up to 650 words, while the essays for the University of California (UC) schools are around 350 words each, and your supplemental essays will vary.

Q: How many essays will I need to write?

A: Around 15 is average. You'll likely write a main personal statement for your Common App, perhaps some separate essays if you're applying to public schools (the UCs require four, for example), plus you'll write supplements for most selective schools, which number anywhere from 6-20, depending on the number of schools you apply to.

Q: What should my essay be about?

A: In a word, you.

Q: What are college admissions officers looking for?

A: They're looking for the answers to these three questions:

1. Who is this person?
2. Will this person contribute something of value to our campus?
3. Can this person write?

Q: How do college admissions officers evaluate my essay?

A: Each school has its own criteria and different readers will prefer different elements. Michael Gulotta (Associate Director of Admissions at American University) for example, has told us he most looks to the essay to assess a student's writing ability. But Rick Diaz (Regional Director of Undergrad Admissions at SMU) is less interested in writing ability and more interested in a student's story.

Q: So which is more important: your story or your writing skill?

A: Both are important. A good story, well told. That's your goal.

Q: When should I start writing my essay?

A: Today. Right now.

Q: How do I structure my essay?

A: You'll learn about two options in this workshop: Narrative Structure and Montage Structure.

Q: How much do essays matter?

A: It depends on the college, but generally between 10%-30%. Essays tend to matter more for small schools, or schools who look at applications holistically.

Q: If my grades are bad, can I get into Harvard with a great essay?

A: Nope. Schools look at your GPA, course rigor and test scores more than anything. When you're being compared to other students with similar GPA/SAT scores, that's when the essays can make or break your chances. Harvard is great, but there are a lot of other awesome schools too. For a list of Colleges That Change Lives, Google "Colleges That Change Lives." (Really.)

Q: Can a bad college essay negatively affect my application?

A: Yes.

COMMON APPLICATION PROMPTS

Choose one of the following prompts. 650 words, strict limit

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.

COALITION APPLICATION PROMPTS

Choose one of the following prompts. 500-650 words.

1. Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.
2. What interests or excites you? How does it shape who you are now or who you might become in the future?
3. Describe a time when you had a positive impact on others. What were the challenges? What were the rewards?
4. Has there been a time when an idea or belief of yours was questioned? How did you respond? What did you learn?
5. What success have you achieved or obstacle have you faced? What advice would you give a sibling or friend going through a similar experience?
6. Submit an essay on a topic of your choice.

ESSENCE OBJECTS EXERCISE

- Excerpted from College Essay Essentials: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing a Successful College Admissions Essay

To listen to the College Essay Guy guide you through this exercise, go here:

www.collegeessayguy.com/guide-objects-exercise

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?)

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

Because I needed... _____
(Choose 2-3 needs from the list below)

FEELINGS

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

NEEDS

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

THE VALUES EXERCISE

Here's my other favorite brainstorming exercise and it'll help you figure out the second half of your essay in about five minutes.

To begin, pick your top 10 values from the list below.

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> personal development | <input type="checkbox"/> wealth | <input type="checkbox"/> courage |
| <input type="checkbox"/> recognition | <input type="checkbox"/> creativity | <input type="checkbox"/> self-love |
| <input type="checkbox"/> accountability | <input type="checkbox"/> knowledge | <input type="checkbox"/> ritual |
| <input type="checkbox"/> inspiration | <input type="checkbox"/> inclusion | <input type="checkbox"/> purpose |
| <input type="checkbox"/> music | <input type="checkbox"/> curiosity | <input type="checkbox"/> privacy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> helping others | <input type="checkbox"/> gratitude | <input type="checkbox"/> freedom |
| <input type="checkbox"/> peace | <input type="checkbox"/> faith | <input type="checkbox"/> quiet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> diversity | <input type="checkbox"/> communication | <input type="checkbox"/> compassion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> expertise | <input type="checkbox"/> interdependence | <input type="checkbox"/> cooperation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> vulnerability | <input type="checkbox"/> efficiency | <input type="checkbox"/> growth |
| <input type="checkbox"/> global awareness | <input type="checkbox"/> stability | <input type="checkbox"/> authenticity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> hunger | <input type="checkbox"/> humor | <input type="checkbox"/> practicality |
| <input type="checkbox"/> my country | <input type="checkbox"/> truth | <input type="checkbox"/> nature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sleep | <input type="checkbox"/> order | <input type="checkbox"/> objectivity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> productivity | <input type="checkbox"/> excellence | <input type="checkbox"/> leadership |
| <input type="checkbox"/> intuition | <input type="checkbox"/> religion | <input type="checkbox"/> wisdom |
| <input type="checkbox"/> culture | <input type="checkbox"/> beauty | <input type="checkbox"/> respect |
| <input type="checkbox"/> healthy boundaries | <input type="checkbox"/> meaningful work | <input type="checkbox"/> strength |
| <input type="checkbox"/> second chances | <input type="checkbox"/> trust | <input type="checkbox"/> flexibility |
| <input type="checkbox"/> listening | <input type="checkbox"/> self-expression | <input type="checkbox"/> financial stability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> family | <input type="checkbox"/> fun | <input type="checkbox"/> empathy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> excitement | <input type="checkbox"/> rationality | <input type="checkbox"/> belonging |
| <input type="checkbox"/> travel | <input type="checkbox"/> democracy | <input type="checkbox"/> equity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> adventure | <input type="checkbox"/> self-control | <input type="checkbox"/> resourcefulness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> laughter | <input type="checkbox"/> balance | <input type="checkbox"/> decisiveness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> entrepreneurship | <input type="checkbox"/> adaptability | <input type="checkbox"/> competence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> wonder | <input type="checkbox"/> success | <input type="checkbox"/> collaboration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> health and fitness | <input type="checkbox"/> independence | <input type="checkbox"/> spirituality |
| <input type="checkbox"/> love | <input type="checkbox"/> variety | <input type="checkbox"/> social change |
| <input type="checkbox"/> close relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> community | <input type="checkbox"/> honesty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> humility | <input type="checkbox"/> patience | <input type="checkbox"/> mindfulness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> art | <input type="checkbox"/> challenges | <input type="checkbox"/> grace |
| <input type="checkbox"/> responsibility | <input type="checkbox"/> autonomy | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> safety | <input type="checkbox"/> loyalty | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

Next, Pick your Top 5 Values.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Once you have those, pick your Top 3.

- _____
- _____
- _____

And then, yes, pick your #1 value. Remember that you're not losing any of the others, you're just picking the most important value for you today.

- _____

TWO APPROACHES TO STRUCTURE

Narrative Structure

You can think of Narrative Structure as classic Hollywood movie structure, focusing on a challenge that fundamentally changed your life. You can think of this approach to writing an essay as breaking down into three basic sections:

Challenges + Effects

This part gets into specific detail regarding a specific challenge the student has faced, and the various effects of that challenge. Tough stuff you've been through. Big experiences. Their subsequent impacts. Various obstacles you've had to overcome.

What I Did About Them

Actions you took to overcome those challenges and their effects, often to meet specific needs. These actions help to illustrate your values and growth.

What I Learned

Lessons and insights you've gained through these experiences. Reflection on how your experiences have shaped you and why that matters.

Montage Structure

What is a montage?

Montage is something you've likely all encountered before, but some may not be familiar with the word itself. It's a technique that involves using separate elements (pictures, words, music, etc.) to create a new whole. 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: one surprises the other at work, probably with flowers; they walk through the park; they dance in the rain; they pass an engagement ring store. You get the idea.

Finding a Thematic Thread

If you're going to build a montage, you need to find a way to make the different experiences you'll use feel connected. Think of it this way: if I just had a paragraph on growing up in Latin America, speaking of which religion, speaking of which literature is important to me, speaking of which... you're going to feel understandably confused. So I need to have something that threads the pieces together.

The sample essay below ("Laptop Stickers") was written by a student who collected stickers on her laptop. Each sticker connected to different values and experiences. Stickers are her thematic thread.

WHAT HAD TO BE DONE (NARRATIVE)

At six years old, I stood locked away in the restroom. I held tightly to a tube of toothpaste because I'd been sent to brush my teeth to distract me from the commotion. Regardless, I knew what was happening: my dad was being put under arrest for domestic abuse. He'd hurt my mom physically and mentally, and my brother Jose and I had shared the mental strain. It's what had to be done.

Living without a father meant money was tight, mom worked two jobs, and my brother and I took care of each other when she worked. For a brief period of time the quality of our lives slowly started to improve as our soon-to-be step-dad became an integral part of our family. He paid attention to the needs of my mom, my brother, and me. But our prosperity was short-lived as my step dad's chronic alcoholism became more and more recurrent. When I was eight, my younger brother Fernando's birth complicated things even further. As my step-dad slipped away, my mom continued working, and Fernando's care was left to Jose and me. I cooked, Jose cleaned, I dressed Fernando, Jose put him to bed. We did what we had to do.

As undocumented immigrants and with little to no family around us, we had to rely on each other. Fearing that any disclosure of our status would risk deportation, we kept to ourselves when dealing with any financial and medical issues. I avoided going on certain school trips, and at times I was discouraged to even meet new people. I felt isolated and at times disillusioned; my grades started to slip.

Over time, however, I grew determined to improve the quality of life for my family and myself.

Without a father figure to teach me the things a father could, I became my own teacher. I learned how to fix a bike, how to swim, and even how to talk to girls. I became resourceful, fixing shoes with strips of duct tape, and I even found a job to help pay bills. I became as independent as I could to lessen the time and money mom had to spend raising me.

I also worked to apply myself constructively in other ways. I worked hard and took my grades from Bs and Cs to consecutive straight A's. I shattered my school's 100M breaststroke record, and learned how to play the clarinet, saxophone, and the oboe. Plus, I not only became the first student in my school to pass the AP Physics 1 exam, I'm currently pioneering my school's first AP Physics 2 course ever.

These changes inspired me to help others. I became president of the California Scholarship Federation, providing students with information to prepare them for college, while creating opportunities for my peers to play a bigger part in our community. I began tutoring kids, teens, and adults on a variety of subjects ranging from basic English to home improvement and even Calculus. As the captain of the water polo and swim team I've led practices crafted to individually push my comrades to their limits, and I've counseled friends through circumstances similar to mine. I've done tons, and I can finally say I'm proud of that.

But I'm excited to say that there's so much I have yet to do. I haven't danced the tango, solved a Rubix Cube, explored how perpetual motion might fuel space exploration, or seen the World Trade Center. And I have yet to see the person that Fernando will become.

I'll do as much as I can from now on. Not because I have to. Because I choose to.

MY LAPTOP STICKERS (MONTAGE)

My laptop is like a passport. It is plastered with stickers all over the outside, inside, and bottom. Each sticker is a stamp, representing a place I've been, a passion I've pursued, or community I've belonged to. These stickers make for an untraditional first impression at a meeting or presentation, but it's one I'm proud of. Let me take you on a quick tour:

"We <3 Design," bottom left corner. Art has been a constant for me for as long as I can remember. Today my primary engagement with art is through design. I've spent entire weekends designing websites and social media graphics for my companies. Design means more to me than just branding and marketing; it gives me the opportunity to experiment with texture, perspective, and contrast, helping me refine my professional style.

"Common Threads," bottom right corner. A rectangular black and red sticker displaying the theme of the 2017 TEDxYouth@Austin event. For years I've been interested in the street artists and musicians in downtown Austin who are so unapologetically themselves. As a result, I've become more open-minded and appreciative of unconventional lifestyles. TED gives me the opportunity to help other youth understand new perspectives, by exposing them to the diversity of Austin where culture is created, not just consumed.

Poop emoji, middle right. My 13-year-old brother often sends his messages with the poop emoji 'echo effect,' so whenever I open a new message from him, hundreds of poops elegantly cascade across my screen. He brings out my goofy side, but also helps me think rationally when I am overwhelmed. We don't have the typical "I hate you, don't talk to me" siblinghood (although occasionally it would be nice to get away from him); we're each other's best friends. Or at least he's mine.

"Lol ur not Harry Styles," upper left corner. Bought in seventh grade and transferred from my old laptop, this sticker is torn but persevering with layers of tape. Despite conveying my fangirl-y infatuation with Harry Styles' boyband, One Direction, for me Styles embodies an artist-activist who uses his privilege for the betterment of society. As a \$42K donor to the Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, a hair donor to the Little Princess Trust, and promoter of LGBTQ+ equality, he has motivated me to be a more public activist instead of internalizing my beliefs.

"Catapult," middle right. This is the logo of a startup incubator where I launched my first company, Threading Twine. I learned that business can provide others access to fundamental human needs, such as economic empowerment of minorities and education. In my career, I hope to be a corporate advocate for the empowerment of women, creating large-scale impact and deconstructing institutional boundaries that obstruct women from working in high-level positions. Working as a women's rights activist will allow me to engage in creating lasting movements for equality, rather than contributing to a cycle that elevates the stances of wealthy individuals.

"Thank God it's Monday," sneakily nestled in the upper right corner. Although I attempt to love all my stickers equally (haha), this is one of my favorites. I always want my association with work to be positive.

And there are many others, including the horizontal, yellow stripes of the Human Rights Campaign; "The Team," a sticker from the Model G20 Economics Summit where I collaborated with youth from around the globe; and stickers from "Kode with Klossy," a community of girls working to promote women's involvement in underrepresented fields.

When my computer dies (hopefully not for another few years), it will be like my passport expiring. It'll be difficult leaving these moments and memories behind, but I probably won't want these stickers in my 20s anyways (except Harry Styles, that's never leaving). My next set of stickers will reveal my next set of aspirations. They hold the key to future paths I will navigate, knowledge I will gain, and connections I will make.

HOME (MONTAGE)

As I enter the double doors, the smell of freshly rolled biscuits hits me almost instantly. I trace the fan blades as they swing above me, emitting a low, repetitive hum resembling a faint melody. After bringing our usual order, the “Tailgate Special,” to the table, my father begins discussing the recent performance of Apple stock with my mother, myself, and my older eleven year old sister. Bojangle’s, a Southern establishment well known for its fried chicken and reliable fast food, is my family’s Friday night restaurant, often accompanied by trips to Eva Perry, the nearby library. With one hand on my breaded chicken and the other on Nancy Drew: Mystery of Crocodile Island, I can barely sit still as the thriller unfolds. They’re imprisoned! Reptiles! Not the enemy’s boat! As I delve into the narrative with a sip of sweet tea, I feel at home.

“Five, six, seven, eight!” As I shout the counts, nineteen dancers grab and begin to spin the tassels attached to their swords while walking heel-to-toe to the next formation of the classical Chinese sword dance. A glance at my notebook reveals a collection of worn pages covered with meticulously planned formations, counts, and movements. Through sharing videos of my performances with my relatives or discovering and choreographing the nuances of certain regional dances and their reflection on the region’s distinct culture, I deepen my relationship with my parents, heritage, and community. When I step on stage, the hours I’ve spent choreographing, creating poses, teaching, and polishing are all worthwhile, and the stage becomes my home.

Set temperature. Calibrate. Integrate. Analyze. Set temperature. Calibrate. Integrate. Analyze. This pulse mimics the beating of my heart, a subtle rhythm that persists each day I come into the lab. Whether I am working under the fume hood with platinum nanoparticles, manipulating raw integration data, or spraying a thin platinum film over pieces of copper, it is in Lab 304 in Hudson Hall that I first feel the distinct sensation, and I’m home. After spending several weeks attempting to synthesize platinum nanoparticles with a diameter between 10 and 16 nm, I finally achieve nanoparticles with a diameter of 14.6 nm after carefully monitoring the sulfuric acid bath. That unmistakable tingling sensation dances up my arm as I scribble into my notebook: I am overcome with a feeling of unbridled joy.

Styled in a t-shirt, shorts, and a worn, dark green lanyard, I sprint across the quad from the elective ‘Speaking Arabic through the Rassias Method’ to ‘Knitting Nirvana’. This afternoon is just one of many at Governor’s School East, where I have been transformed from a high school student into a philosopher, a thinker, and an avid learner. While I attend GS at Meredith College for Natural Science, the lessons learned and experiences gained extend far beyond physics concepts, serial dilutions, and toxicity. I learn to trust myself to have difficult yet necessary conversations about the political and economic climate. Governor’s School breeds a culture of inclusivity and multidimensionality, and I am transformed from “girl who is hardworking” or “science girl” to someone who indulges in the sciences, debates about psychology and the economy, and loves to swing and salsa dance. As I form a slip knot and cast on, I’m at home.

My home is a dynamic and eclectic entity. Although I’ve lived in the same house in Cary, North Carolina for 10 years, I have found and carved homes and communities that are filled with and enriched by tradition, artists, researchers, and intellectuals. While I may not always live within a 5 mile radius of a Bojangle’s or in close proximity to Lab 304, learning to become a more perceptive daughter and sister, to share the beauty of my heritage, and to take risks and redefine scientific and personal expectations will continue to impact my sense of home.

EASTER (NARRATIVE)

It was Easter and we should've been celebrating with our family, but my father had locked us in the house. If he wasn't going out, neither were my mother and I.

My mother came to the U.S. from Mexico to study English. She'd been an exceptional student and had a bright future ahead of her. But she fell in love and eloped with the man that eventually became my father. He loved her in an unhealthy way, and was both physically and verbally abusive. My mother lacked the courage to start over so she stayed with him and slowly let go of her dreams and aspirations. But she wouldn't allow for the same to happen to me.

In the summer before my junior year I was offered a scholarship to study abroad in Egypt. Not to my surprise, my father refused to let me go. But my mother wouldn't let him crush my dreams as well. I'd do this for myself and for my mother's unfulfilled aspirations. I accepted the scholarship.

I thought I'd finally have all the freedom I longed for in Egypt, but initially I didn't. On a weekly basis I heard insults and received harassment in the streets, yet I didn't yield to the societal expectations for women by staying indoors. I continued to roam throughout Egypt, exploring the Great Pyramids of Giza, cruising on the Nile, and traveling to Luxor and Aswan. And before I returned to the U.S. I received the unexpected opportunity to travel to London and Paris. It was surreal: a girl from the ghetto traveling alone around the world with a map in her hands. And no man or cultural standards could dictate what I was to do. I rode the subway from Cambridge University to the British Museum. I took a train from London to Paris and in two days I visited the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, Notre Dame Cathedral, and took a cruise on the Seine. Despite the language barrier I found I had the self-confidence to approach anyone for directions.

While I was in Europe enjoying my freedom, my mother moved out and rented her own place. It was as if we'd simultaneously gained our independence. We were proud of each other. And she vicariously lived through my experiences as I sent her pictures and told her about my adventures.

Finally, we were free.

I currently live in the U.S. with my mother. My father has gradually transformed from a frigid man to the loving father I always yearned for. Life isn't perfect, but for the moment I'm enjoying tranquility and stability with my family and are communicating much better than ever before.

I'm involved in my school's Leadership Council as leader of our events committee. We plan and execute school dances and create effective donation letters. I see this as a stepping-stone for my future, as I plan to double major in Women's Studies and International Relations with a focus on Middle Eastern studies. After the political turmoil of the Arab Spring many Middle Eastern countries refuse to grant women equal positions in society because that would contradict Islamic texts. By oppressing women they're silencing half of their population. I believe these Islamic texts have been misinterpreted throughout time, and my journey towards my own independence has inspired me to help other women find liberation as well.

My Easter will drastically differ from past years. Rather than being locked at home, my mother and I will celebrate outdoors our rebirth and renewal.



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THE "FEELINGS AND NEEDS" WORKSHEET