

[What you need to know about the new Common App Essay prompts](#)

Have you seen the two new essay prompts on the [Common Application](#)? Every few years, the Common App, a tool used by more than 700 colleges to help students apply seamlessly to multiple schools, updates its essay prompts. The changes are based on feedback from students, parents, high school counselors, educational consultants and member schools following each admissions cycle. This year, the Common App added two new prompts; they also tweaked some of the current questions.

What does it all mean for high school juniors who are about to start the journey to college? Nothing, really. The task is the same. The revisions to prompts 2, 3 and 5 clarify the purpose of those questions, while the new prompts provide a few more options.

Reflection Matters Most

The changes reinforce the message we share with our students and in our popular book, [How to Write an Effective College Application Essay](#), which was just released in paperback. At its core, a personal statement is all about reflection. An effective essay shows insight into a student's character because it answers two central questions: 1) What happened? and 2) Why does it matter?

Why a topic matters to a student (the reflection) is more important than what happened (the experience, the activity, the idea, the concept, or the person who influenced that student).

Here are 4 simple steps to help you understand any Common App prompt so you can choose a meaningful topic that demonstrates both what happened and why it matters.

1. Review the instructions

Most students skip straight to the prompts and miss the important information built into the instructions. Make sure you read this first: "The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response."

2. Ask one more question

Before choosing a prompt or exploring topics, ask yourself: *What do I want colleges to know about me that they wouldn't otherwise know from the rest of my application?* Think about traits and characteristics, not accomplishments.

3. Review the prompts

Look closely at the seven prompts once you know which characteristic(s) you want to share. (We've tackled #6 and #7 below.) Do not dive into topic ideas until you've confirmed that you understand the 7 options.

4. Brainstorm ideas

The goal is to find a topic that best illustrates the trait or traits you want to share, and which also responds directly to the prompt. If you choose a story but can't explain *why* it makes a strong Common App topic, or how it demonstrates something meaningful about you, you're not ready to write a draft.

The New Prompts: What Are They All About?

Just to confirm that we understood the purpose of the changes, we went straight to the source – Scott Anderson, Senior Director of Education and Partnerships for the Common Application. He said:

The prompts have changed slightly, but the instructions remain the same: What do you want application readers to know about you? The prompts simply serve to help students approach that question from as many angles as possible, whether it be maturity, identity, curiosity, pastimes, aspirations, community, relationships, or anything else. Students should pick the prompt that supports and gets them excited about the story they want to tell about themselves.

Here's our take on Prompts #6 and #7, which have generated the most questions from our students and industry colleagues:

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?*

The key word in this prompt is "engaging," but even that word can seem overwhelming. Remind yourself that the essay is not about the topic, idea or concept; it's about the applicant. You don't have to impress with big ideas. Try asking yourself questions like these: *Why is this topic, idea or concept so engaging? How does it make me feel? Who do I talk to about these ideas? Where do I go to research new concepts? What have I learned about myself?*

Maybe you care about social justice. Perhaps you're captivated by humor or technology. You can explore the concept overall or share an example of that concept in action. Whether you collected clothes and toiletries for a local family who lost their home in a fire or attracted ten thousand followers by tweeting a daily joke, why did you do it? How does that activity demonstrate how you think, problem-solve or process information? What did you learn about yourself? How did the idea affect or change you? If you want to focus on the big picture, make sure you know how you want to approach the concept before starting to write a first draft.

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.*

The key word in this prompt is "choice." While #7 appears to be different from the other prompts, the purpose is the same. Yes, applicants can submit any essay they want in that 650-word space, but as the overall instructions clearly state, even an A+ paper must still illustrate something meaningful about the student.

Suppose you want to submit a critical analysis you wrote for Honors English about a character in *Jayne Eyre*. Could it work? Maybe. Ask yourself what the essay demonstrates about you. Do you yearn for more than what traditional society allows, like Jane? Does the paper demonstrate how the book propelled you toward political activism? Does it show how the book changed you? After admissions officers read the paper, will they learn something new about you? If not, it won't work as a college essay, no matter how well-written.

Both new prompts do exactly what the old ones did – maybe better.

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