The college essay is your opportunity to show admissions officers who you are apart from your grades and test scores and to distinguish yourself from the rest of talented applicants.

Common Application College Essay Prompts (16-17)

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.*

**Tip:** Answer this prompt by reflecting on a hobby, facet of your personality, or experience that is genuinely meaningful and unique to you. Admissions officers want to feel connected to you and an honest, personal statement about who you are draws them in. Your love of superheroes, baking chops, or family history are all fair game if you can tie it back to who you are or what you believe in. Avoid a rehash of the accomplishments on your [high school resume](https://www.princetonreview.com/college-advice/high-school-resume)and choose something that the admissions committee will not discover when reading the rest of your application.

1. *The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?*

**Tip:** You're trying to show colleges your best self, so it might seem counterintuitive to willingly acknowledge a time you failed. But overcoming challenges demonstrates courage, grit, and perseverance! That’s why the last piece of this prompt is essential. The obstacle you write about can be large or small, but you must show the admissions committee how your perspective changed as a result.

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

**Tip:** Your answer to this question could focus on a time you stood up to others or an experience when your own preconceived view was challenged. Choose this prompt if you have a relevant—and specific!—experience to recount (and reflect on). A vague essay about a hot button issue doesn’t tell the admissions committee anything useful about YOU.

1. *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.*

**Tip:** This essay is designed to get at the heart of how you think and what makes you tick. Present a situation or quandary and show steps toward the solution. Admissions officers want insight into your thought process and the issues you grapple with, so explain how you became aware of the dilemma and how you tackled solving it. Don’t forget to explain why the problem is important to you!

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

Tip: The accomplishment or event you write about can be anything from a major milestone to a smaller moment. Describe the event that shaped you but take care to also show *what* you learned or *how*you changed. Colleges are looking for a sense of maturity and introspection—pinpoint the transformation and demonstrate your personal growth.

Other College Essay Prompts

1. *Describe a person you admire.*

**Tip:** You don’t have to write about a beloved figure like Gandhi or Abraham Lincoln. The admissions committee doesn't need to be convinced they are impressive people. Focus on yourself: Choose someone who has actually caused you to change your behavior or your worldview, and write about how this person influenced you.

1. *Why do you want to attend this school?*

**Tip:** Be honest and specific when you respond to this question. Avoid generalities like "to get a good liberal arts education” or “to develop career skills," and use details that show your interests: "I'm an aspiring doctor and your science department has a terrific reputation." Colleges are more likely to admit students who can articulate specific reasons why the school is a good fit for them beyond its reputation or ranking on any list. Use the college's website and literature to do your research about programs, professors, and other opportunities that appeal to you.

1. *What is a book you love?*

**Tip:** Your answer should not be a book report. Don't just summarize the plot; detail why you enjoyed this particular text and what it meant to you. What does your favorite book reveal about you? How do you identify with it, and how has it become personal to you? Again, be honest in answering this question—don't choose a classic from your literature class or a piece of philosophy just because you think it will make you seem smarter. Writing fluently and passionately about a book close to you is always better than writing shakily or generally about a book that doesn't inspire you.

1. *What is an*[*extracurricular activity*](https://www.princetonreview.com/college-advice/extracurricular-activities)*that has been meaningful to you?*

**Tip:** Avoid slipping into clichés or generalities. Take this opportunity to really examine an experience that taught you something you didn't previously know about yourself, got you out of your comfort zone, or forced you to grow. Sometimes it's better to write about something that was hard for you because you learned something than it is to write about something that was easy for you because you think it sounds impressive. As with all essay questions, the most important thing is to tell a great story: how you discovered this activity, what drew you to it, and what it's shown you about yourself.

1. *If you could have lunch with any person, living, dead, or fictional, who would it be and what would you discuss?*
2. *Who do you admire the most? Why?*
3. *What do you consider to be the best advice you ever received? Who gave you that advice and did you follow that advice or not?*
4. *What difference do you want to make in the world? Where*specifically*are you going with your life?*
5. *As of right now, what do you see as your long-term goals in life?*
6. *Think back to a situation in your life where you had to decide between taking a risk and playing it safe. Which choice did you make? What was the outcome of your choice? Would you have made the same decision looking back on the experience or would you have made a different decision?*
7. *Describe an experience that forever changed your life and your outlook on life.*
8. *Why have you chosen to spend the next four years of your life in college?*
9. *What would you describe to be your most unique or special skill that differentiates you from everyone else?*
10. *If you were given the capability to travel back in time to any period in history, where would you head to and why?*
11. *Choose one quotation that defines who you are and explain why that quotation describes you so well.*
12. *How has the neighborhood you’ve grown up in molded you into the person you are today?*
13. *Devise a question that is not on this college admission form and provide a complete, thoughtful answer to it.*

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<http://www.sparknotes.com/college/admissions/page21.html>

<https://apply.jhu.edu/apply/essays-that-worked/2020/>