
10 Quick and Essential Tips for Writing a Great Common App Essay

#1 Choose the Best Prompt for You

- Choose a prompt you can answer with honesty and passion.
- Know that *how* you answer the prompt is more important than *what* you answer or which prompt you choose.
- Tell *your* story, don't borrow or embellish.
- Know that the seemingly *ordinary* experiences of life are interesting and profound.

#2 Brainstorm Thoroughly

- Write down potential subject options for *all* prompts.
- Free-write using stream-of-consciousness journaling before you actually start drafting.
- Draft brief outlines for a couple of subjects to see which lends itself best to essay form.
- Ask yourself some of the following open-ended questions for inspiration when choosing a prompt or developing content:
 - What sets me apart from my peers?
 - What do I *most* want the admissions board to know about me?
 - In what ways have I most grown or changed?
 - What do I like or respect most about myself?
 - How do I deal with hardships?
 - If time and money were not factors, what would I *love* to do or be?
 - What are my favorite family stories to hear retold or share with others?

#3 Laser Focus on Your Subject

- Choose *one* highly specific subject, obstacle, identity trait, etc.
- Avoid focusing on content that spans too much time or requires lots of back story for context.
- Remember that going “narrower and deeper” is better than going “wider and shallower” in this case.

#4 Organize

- Your essay needs a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- The above should be expressed through an introduction (with or without a thesis statement), a body, and a conclusion.
- Break paragraphs whenever natural, when you shift gears.
- Make sure that each paragraph speaks directly to the prompt and question at hand.

#5 Remember the 2-Part Rule

- Provide a thorough *explanation and description* of the subject at hand.
- Provide a thorough *reflection* on and *analysis* of why this content is meaningful.

#6 Be Vivid and Specific

- Provide as many clear, concise, and specific details and examples as possible.
- Use evocative imagery and language (similes, analogies, well-chosen diction, etc.) when appropriate, without overloading your essay with them.

#7 Be Compelling, Not Cliche

- Reach for a meaningful moral or lesson learned without being cheesy or preachy.
- Avoid overly general or overused platitudes and cliches (e.g., “never judge a book by its cover”).

#8 Mind Your Tone

- Write like *you*, avoiding overly academic or pretentious language (the thesaurus is your friend, but don’t abuse it).
- Yet write professionally, avoiding profanity and overly conversational or colloquial language.

#9 Brand But Don't Brag

- “Brand” yourself by telling your unique story in your own tone, with authority and insight.
- However, convey humility and don't brag or come across as too self-congratulatory.

#10 Revise and Proofread

- Write at least three drafts of your essay, taking a break between each to clear your mind and boost reflection.
- Read your essay aloud to catch any clunky or incorrect language.
- Make sure your essay is pristine: free of all spelling, grammar, punctuation and style errors.