**Common Essay Prompts**

**350 – 500 words**

**Option #1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.**

* **Evaluate. How did experience affect you?**
* **A “significant” experience can be small.**
* **Don’t brag about an achievement.**
* **An “ethical dilemma doesn’t have to be newsworthy.**
* **Reveal your character.**

**Option #2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.**

* **Be sure to discuss**
* **Focusing on home is often better**
* **Don’t lecture your audience**
* **Give emphasis to “The importance to you”**
* **Show why you’d be a good choice for the college**

**Option #3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you and describe that influence.**

* **Adjust the wording in this topic.**
* **Think twice about essays on Mom or Dad**
* **Don’t be star struck**
* **Obscure subject matter is fine**
* **The “Significant influence” need not to be positive**
* **You are also writing about yourself**

**Option #4. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.**

* **Don’t do too much describing**
* **Keep the focus on the word “explain”**
* **Watch out for predictable choices**
* **Be careful with fictional characters**
* **Don’t write about your favorite contemporary song**
* **Approach the word “creative” in broad terms**
* **Keep much of the focus on you**

**Option #5. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you**

* **Diversity isn’t just about race**
* **Understand why colleges want diversity**
* **Be careful describing Third-world encounters**
* **Be careful describing racial encounters**
* **Keep much of the focus on you**

**Option #6. Topic of your choice.**

* **Make sure options 1-5 aren’t appropriate**
* **Don’t try too hard to be clever**
* **Make sure your essay is an essay**
* **Reveal yourself**

#2

**1. Be Sure to "Discuss"**

Be sure to read the question carefully. The common application is not asking you to "describe" or "summarize" an issue. So, if the bulk of your essay is describing the terrible conditions in Darfur, you are not answering the question. To "discuss" something you need to think critically and write analytically.

**2. Focusing Close to Home is Often Better**

The admissions office gets lots of essays on big, newsworthy issues like the war in Iraq, the fight against terror and U.S. dependence on fossil fuels. In truth, however, these giant and complex issues often don't impact our immediate lives as much as more local and personal issues. Since colleges want to get to know you through your essay, be sure to focus on an issue that will actually teach them something about you.

**3. Don't Lecture Your Audience**

The admissions officers don't want to be lectured on the evils on global warming or the cons on world trade. Save that writing for a paper in your college Political Science class. The heart of an essay on option #2 needs to be about *you*, so make sure your writing is as much personal as it is political.

**4. Give Emphasis to "The Importance to You"**

The end of the prompt for option #2 asks you to discuss the issue's "importance to you." Don't short change this essential part of the question. Whatever issue you discuss, you want to make sure that it truly is important to you and that your essay reveals *why* it is important to you. A good essay on this option reveals the person behind the writing.

**5. Show Why You'd Be a Good Choice for the College**

Trust me -- the common application doesn't include option #2 because colleges want to learn about world issues. Colleges want to learn about you, and they want to see evidence that you will add value to the campus community. The essay is really the only place in the application where you can highlight your convictions and personality. As you discuss an issue, make sure you reveal yourself to be the type of thoughtful, introspective, passionate and generous person who will make an ideal campus citizen.

#3

**1. Push the Language in This Option**

I've never been a fan of the wording of essay option #3, for if you followed the guidelines too literally, you would end up with a bland essay. The words "indicate" and "describe" suggest that your essay does not need to demonstrate any critical thought. However, a good response to #3 does far more than "describe" a person's influence on you. You should examine *why* the person was influential to you, and you should *analyze* the ways in which you have changed because of your relationship with the person.

**2. Think Twice About Essays on Mom or Dad**

There is nothing wrong with writing about one of your parents for this essay, but make sure your relationship with your parent is unusual and compelling in some way. The admissions folks get a lot of essays that focus on a parent, and your writing won't stand out if you simply make generic points about parenting. If you find yourself making points like "my Dad was a great role model" or "my mother always pushed me to do my best," rethink your approach to the question. Consider the millions of students who could write the exact same essay.

**3. Don't Be Star Struck**

In most cases, you should avoid writing an essay about the lead singer in your favorite band or the movie star who you idolize. Such essays can be okay if handled well, but often the writer ends up sounding like a pop culture junkie rather than a thoughtful independent thinker.

**4. Obscure Subject Matter is Fine**

Be sure to read [Max's essay](http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/a/student-teacher.htm) on option #3. Max writes about a rather unremarkable junior high kid he encountered while teaching summer camp. The essay succeeds in part because the choice of subject matter is unusual and obscure. Among a million application essays, Max's will be the only one to focus on this young boy. Also, the boy isn't even a role model. Instead, he's an ordinary kid who inadvertently makes Max challenge his preconceptions.

**5. The "Significant Influence" Need Not Be Positive**

The majority of essays written for option #3 are about role models: "my Mom/Dad/brother/friend/teacher/neighbor/coach taught me to be a better person through his or her great example..." Such essays are often excellent, but they are also a bit predictable. This essay, however, is about a "significant" influence, not necessarily a "positive" influence. [Max's essay](http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/a/student-teacher.htm) focuses on a kid who is explicitly *not* a role model. You could even write about someone who is abusive or hateful. Evil can have as much "influence" on us as good.

**6. You Are Also Writing About Yourself**

When the prompt asks you to "describe that influence," it is asking you to be reflective and introspective. While an essay for option #3 is partly about the influential person, it is equally about you. To understand someone's influence on you, you need to understand yourself -- your strengths, your short-comings, the areas where you still need to grow. As with all the essay options, you need to make sure a response to #3 reveals your own interests, passions, personality and character. The details of this essay need to reveal that you are the type of person who will contribute to the campus community in a positive way.

#4

**1. Don't Do Too Much "Describing"**

Although option #4 begins with the word "describe," description in its own right isn't very interesting. If you spend most of the essay describing the accomplishments of George Washington or the movements of a Beethoven Symphony, you will have created an essay that fails to demonstrate higher-level thinking skills. So, be sure to keep the mere description to a minimum, and keep the focus on *analyzing* the character, historical figure or creative work and its relationship to you.

**2. Keep the Focus on the Word "Explain"**

This is related to the above point -- while you'll want to keep the "description" to a minimum, you should really do a lot with the final part of the prompt ("explain that influence"). The explanation is where you will present a thoughtful discussion of yourself and the things that influence you. The explanation is what reveals your passions, interests and personality. It's this part of the essay that has the most value for the college admissions folks.

**3. Watch Out for Predictable Choices**

When option #4 is handled correctly, your essay won't sound like a dozen other essays. Thus, it's often wise to shy away from predictable figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Albert Einstein. Try to identify a character, historical figure or creative work that is a bit less predictable and that connects clearly with your passions and interests.

**4. Be Careful with Fictional Characters**

You should be wary of choosing a trivial, humorous or cartoon character for this option. If you do, you run the danger of looking like you don't take the essay requirement seriously. The college admissions folks want to get to know you through your writing, so make sure your writing isn't shallow, facetious or dismissive. While it might be fun to write about a *South Park* character, does such an essay really create the best portrait of you for the admissions officers? At the same time, a skillful writer can make almost any subject matter work. Check out [Felicity's essay on Lisa Simpson](http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/a/vegetarian.htm) for an example.

**5. Don't Write About Your Favorite Contemporary Song**

Music can certainly be a good focus for this essay, but the admissions officers get tired of reading hundreds of essays about songs by students' favorite bands. For one, the lyrics of most popular music really aren't that profound, and you also run the danger of having a reader who doesn't share your musical tastes.

**6. Approach the Word "Creative" in Broad Terms**

The phrase "creative work" in the prompt often makes us think of things like poetry or painting. However, every field -- engineering, science, psychology, mathematics, religion, medicine -- depends upon creativity for its advancement. The best scientists are great creative thinkers. Some of the best essays for option #4 focus on creative works outside of the arts. For example, a novel technique for attacking the AIDS virus is a "creative work."

**7. Keep Much of the Focus on You**

Spend a bit of your essay explaining the "influence on you." The admissions folks don't want to learn about the influential work or character as much as they want to learn about you. The essay is a tool for helping a college figure out if you'll be a good match for the campus community. If your essay doesn't reveal your interests and personality, you haven't succeeded in responding to the essay question

#5

**1. Diversity Isn't Just About Race**

The prompt for option #5 explicitly states that you should define diversity in broad terms. It isn't just about skin color. Colleges want to enroll students who have a diverse range of interests, beliefs and experiences. Many college applicants quickly shy away from this option because they don't think they bring diversity to a campus. Not true. Even a white male from the suburbs has values and life experiences that are uniquely his own.

**2. Understand Why Colleges Want "Diversity"**

Option #5 is designed to give you an opportunity to explain what interesting qualities you'll bring to the campus community. There are check boxes on the application that address your race, so that isn't the point here. Most colleges believe that the best learning environment includes students who bring new ideas, new perspectives, new passions and new talents to the school. A bunch of like-minded clones have very little to teach each other, and they will grow little from their interactions. As you think about this question, ask yourself, "What will I add to the campus? Why will the college be a better place when I'm in attendance?"

**3. Be Careful Describing Third-World Encounters**

College admissions counselors sometimes call it "that Haiti essay" -- an essay about a visit to a third-world country. Invariably, the writer discusses shocking encounters with poverty, a new awareness of the privileges he or she has, and greater sensitivity to the inequality and diversity of the planet. This type of essay can too easily become generic and predictable. This doesn't mean you can't write about a Habitat for Humanity trip to a third-world country, but you want to be careful to avoid clichés. Also, make sure your statements reflect well upon you. A claim like "I never knew so many people lived with so little" can make you sound naive.

**4. Be Careful Describing Racial Encounters**

Racial difference is actually an excellent topic for an admissions essay, but you need to handle the topic carefully. As you describe that Japanese, Native American, African American or Caucasian friend or acquaintance, you want to make sure your language doesn't inadvertently create racial stereotypes. I've seen a lot of essays in which students simultaneously praise a friend's different perspective while using stereotyping or even racist language.

**5. Keep Much of the Focus on You**

As with all the personal essay options, #5 is asking about you -- what diversity you will bring to campus, or what ideas about diversity you will bring. Always keep in mind the primary purpose of the essay. Colleges want to get to know the students who will become part of the campus community. If your entire essay describes life in Indonesia, you've failed to do this. If your essay is all about your favorite friend from Korea, you have also failed. Whether you describe your own contribution to campus diversity, or if you talk about an encounter with diversity, the essay needs to reveal your character, values and personality. The college is enrolling you, not the diverse people you've encountered.

#6

**1. Make Sure Options 1 Through 5 Aren't Appropriate**

I've rarely seen an admissions essay that doesn't fit into one of the first five Common Application essay options. Even the [sample essay by Lora](http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/a/EatingEyeballs.htm) which she submitted under option #6 could fit into option #1. In truth, it probably doesn't matter much if you write your essay under option #6 when it could fit elsewhere (unless the fit with another option is obvious) -- it's the quality of the essay that most matters.

**2. Don't Try Too Hard To Be Clever**

Some students make the mistake of assuming that "Topic of Your Choice" means that they can write about *anything*. Keep in mind that the admissions officers take the essay seriously, so you should too. This doesn't mean you can't be humorous, but you do need to make sure your essay has substance. If your essay focuses more on a good laugh than on revealing why you'd make a good college student, you should rethink your approach.

**3. Make Sure Your Essay Is An Essay (No Poems, Drawings, etc.)**

Every now and then a budding creative writer decides to submit a poem, play or other creative work for essay option #6. Don't do it. The Common Application allows for supplemental materials, so you should include your creative work there. The essay should be an essay -- non-fiction prose that explores a topic and reveals your character.

**4. Reveal Yourself**

Any topic is a possibility for option #6, but you want to make sure your writing fulfills the purpose of the admissions essay. The college admissions folks are looking for evidence that you'll make a good campus citizen. Your essay should reveal your character, values, personality, beliefs and (if appropriate) sense of humor. You want your reader to end your essay thinking, "Yes, this is someone who I want to live in my community."