

Common App Prompt Decoder

PROMPT #1

What it says

“ 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. ”

What it means

How lucky are you? This is a super versatile, catch-all prompt. Use it to describe any experience large or small that defines you and that does not fit anywhere else on the application (including the other prompts!). What do you love, and why do you love it? How would you define yourself? What funny story do you tell friends and family over and over again, and why do you think it always comes up? How are these stories and qualities representative of who you are at your core?

PROMPT #2

What it says

“ 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? ”

What it means

Remember this simple equation: on your college application, failure = success. How do you deal with hardship? Are you the kind of person who can rebound- who turns every experience, good or bad, into one from which you can learn something? Above all else, positivity is key.



PROMPT #3

What it says

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

What it means

This is your chance to take a stand! When has your opinion been unpopular? Why are you the kind of person who is willing to stand up for what you believe in? What is important to you on a fundamental level of morals and values? Prompt #3 can also be one of the riskiest prompts, so think carefully about the story you want to tell or opinion you want to share.



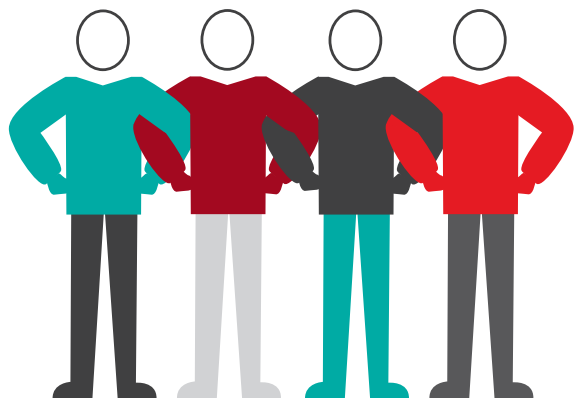
PROMPT #4

What it says

“ 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? ”

What it means

This question is meant to offer students the opportunity to reflect on the role gratitude plays in their lives, as well as how the practice of giving thanks and acknowledging life's gifts motivates and inspires them. When have you felt heard and seen? **How do you pay it forward?**



PROMPT #5

What it says

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

What it means

We've often found that the **smaller, less formal events** make for **more surprising and memorable essays**; but as with any of the other prompts, as long as you can answer with originality and put a unique twist on your subject matter, all ideas, formal and informal, big and small, are fair game. Keep in mind that “accomplishment” and “event,” are words that leave themselves open to interpretation. What were the moments in life that fundamentally changed you as a person? When did you learn something that made you feel more adult, more capable, more grown up?



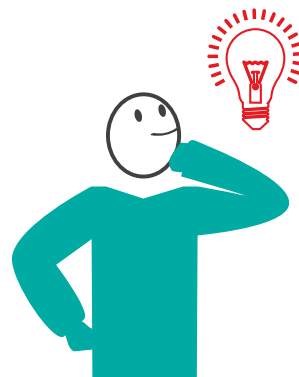
PROMPT #6

What it says

“ 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? ”

What it means

How do you process information? How do you seek out new sources of content and inspiration? How resourceful are you when your curiosity is piqued to the fullest? Your answer to this prompt should also reveal something to admissions about the breadth or depth of your interests



PROMPT #7

What it says

“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.”

What it means

While being able to write about whatever you wish sounds great in theory, some students find that they are debilitated by the “topic of your choice” option because it offers too much choice. Use some of the other prompts as starting points for your brainstorming and freewriting journeys. If, after careful consideration, your magic essay topic does not work within the confines of Prompts 1-6, the glorious, all-encompassing **Prompt #7 will be here to catch you.**



★ IMPORTANT ★



Keep the Common App prompts in the back of your head, but don’t let them monopolize your brainstorming sessions. Think about what you want to say first—you can fit your best stories to the prompts later. So take a minute to run through the above advice one more time. NOW fold these prompts away and hide them in the back of your brain (or under your bed) until further notice.

