

# THE COLLEGE ESSAY

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# QUESTION

## Why an essay?



# TO GIVE YOU THE OPPORTUNITY TO...

- Personalize your application
- Present your writing ability/style
- Share your:
  - Ambitions
  - Life
  - Interests
  - Experiences
  - Personality
  - Passions



# STARTING OFF: BASICS

- Follow directions
  - Answer one of the prompts – whether on the main application essay or on the supplemental application essays
  - Write using proper English grammar
  - Adhere to length (use words wisely)
  - Keep it generic
  - Select a **legible** font



# TOPIC SELECTION

- Think it through
- Keep it simple
- Consider how the topic is a reflection of yourself
- Select a manageable topic. Avoid overly ambitious topics like world peace or the history of your entire life. A good topic is usually a based on a smaller, personal and meaningful experience or insight.
- Be mindful of your audience
- Manage difficult topics
- Careful of what is left unsaid



# WORD CHOICE

- Keep your reader in mind
- Write with an active voice (avoid passive)
- Avoid jargon, unfamiliar expressions
- Use words that you know
- Ask for feedback, but don't lose your own voice





## NEW LAST YEAR:

- Enforced word limit (250-650)
- 5 new essay prompts (to be reviewed annually)
- Opportunity to edit and submit up to 3 versions of your essay
- Ability to compose your response directly in the application using text entry fields, or cut and paste a response from a word processing program



# PERSONAL DESCRIPTORS EXERCISE



## QUESTION

What essay topics do we often read?



# THE BIG THREE

- Athletics: The big game



- Community service (with travel): Change the world



- Essay about the other: My grandmother, my hero



# OPENING SENTENCES

- “I always strived to be someone with a lot of money and power.”
- “My brother and I searched frantically for it, knowing it moved quickly from block to block.”
- “Have you ever wished you were a Disney Prince?”
- “We only have three rules in the Juggling Club.”
- “I was addicted to eating mini tacos.”
- “ “Sorry!” I exclaimed while chasing after runaway shopping carts.”
- “It’s fall and I’ve been working on “my college essay” since the summer.”



# OPENING SENTENCES CONTINUED

- “When you’re miserable, every day seems to blend together.”
- “I was a Dumb Blonde once.”
- “My guidance counselor and my mother have both told me not to write my admissions essay about the Israeli-Arab conflict.”
- I did not want to be Jesus but everyone voted for me.
- “When I read the question “Why do you want to go to Ohio State?” the first thing I thought of was your football team.”
- “I believe in magic.”
- “Since that fateful day seven years ago, when I accidentally cut my brother’s hand with a pair of hedge clippers, I have always wanted to become a doctor.”
- “The phone rang at 3:15 on July 5, 2006.”



## QUESTION

What are you writing about?

Let's Brainstorm



## COMMON APP ESSAY TOPIC

- “Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.”

Examples?



# ACTUAL ESSAYS

- “Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.”
  - I have an identical twin
  - I am adopted
  - I was raised by my grandparents
  - I am bi-racial



## COMMON APP ESSAY TOPIC

- “Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?”

Examples?



# ACTUAL ESSAYS

- “Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?”
  - I was cut from the hockey team
  - I failed my driving test
  - I had a disastrous experience doing my own laundry
  - I did not win the class president election



## COMMON APP ESSAY TOPIC

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

Examples?



# ACTUAL ESSAYS

- Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
- I am a vegan
- I reported an act of academic dishonesty
- I confronted a cyber bully
- I supported (in court) my teacher who was charged with harassment



## COMMON APP ESSAY TOPIC

- “Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?”

Examples?



# ACTUAL ESSAYS

- “Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?”
  - Hiking AMC trails in the White Mountains
  - My family living room
  - The town pool
  - My school’s science fair



## COMMON APP ESSAY TOPIC

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

Examples?



# ACTUAL ESSAYS

- “Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.”
  - Earning my driver’s license
  - Staying home for the first time (over a weekend)
  - Driving my little sister to soccer practice



MAKE IT SHINE



# ACTUAL ESSAYS - EXAMPLE #1



# ACTUAL ESSAYS - EXAMPLE #1



# EXAMPLE #1

My brother and I searched frantically for it, knowing it moved quickly from block to block. We had obviously missed it on our street. We sprinted two blocks over to Crescent Street and there it was—the Mr. Softee ice cream truck. Waving my money in the air, I slowed down, almost tasting the ice cream sandwich I had longed for all day. Too late! It was speeding away. Again, we took up the chase, dashing from street to street, but always just in time to see the truck fading into the distance. Finally we collapsed on a building stoop, out of breath and without our ice cream.

It had been a scorching summer day in New York. My brother and I were spending the summer in Watertown with my aunt, my mother's sister, and her children. All of us were running errands: picking up bagels at the deli, dropping soiled clothes at the Laundromat, and returning books to the library. As we walked towards the grocery store, I saw it—the ice cream truck. Asking my aunt to stop and treat us to the cold refreshment was a waste of time. "Errands first," she said, "and then the rest of your chores."

Back at the apartment, I did some quick figuring. The truck roamed the neighborhood most of the day. If we finished our chores we might be able to catch it on Ditmars or Crescent. My aunt agreed that when all of the chores were finished my brother and I could get our ice cream. To her surprise, we divided the work so that we could finish faster. I took the Swiffer and he the mini-vac; we flew through the rooms leaving not a speck of dust anywhere. Flabbergasted by our speed, my aunt handed over the money and sent us off on our quest.

Twenty minutes later, with our heads low, we walked back, dejected, humiliated by our failure. Our aunt reasoned, "Sometimes hard work and effort do not pay off, they do not automatically guarantee success." Then she laughed, adding, "But at least the house is clean."

Running after that ice cream truck with my brother is one of my fondest memories of childhood. We had worked together towards a common goal, so sure that our achievement would result in the reward of the coveted ice cream sandwich. I have since realized that our goal was met, we finished our chores and satisfied our aunt. What we didn't get was the prize.

I don't expect rewards, public recognition, or accolades for the work that I see in my future. I want to get the job done well, know that I succeeded in reaching my goals, and feel personal pride in my achievements.

If anyone would like to give me an ice-cream sandwich too—that would be fine.

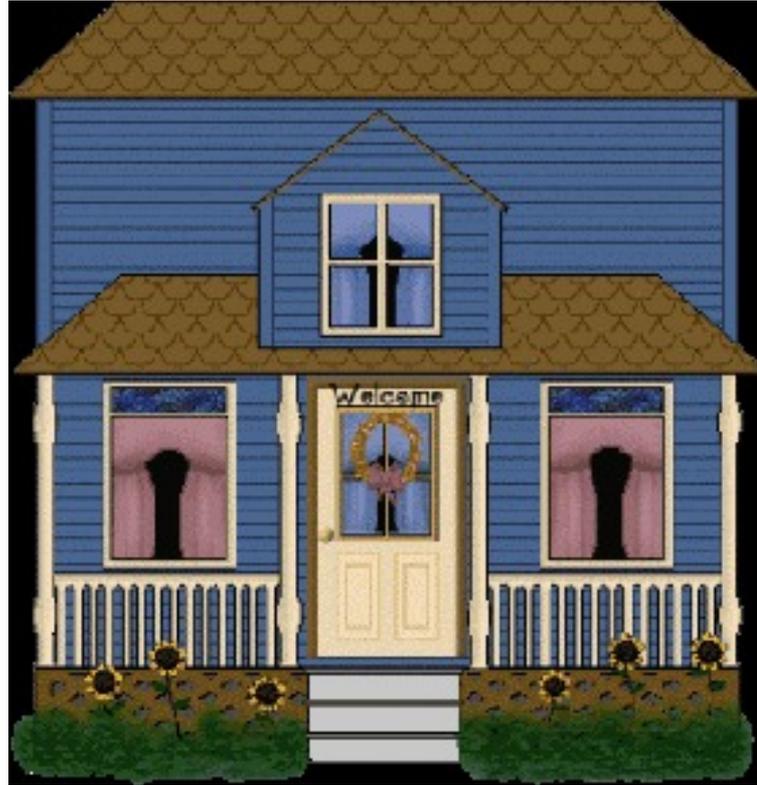


# EXAMPLE #1: DISCUSSION

- What did you learn about this student?
- What did you enjoy about this essay?
- What didn't you enjoy about this essay?
- Did the applicant come to life?
- Were the ideas presented clearly?
- What essay question did he answer? (Did he answer it effectively?)
- Would you like to see the student on your campus?



# EXAMPLE #2



## EXAMPLE #2

The phone rang at 3:15 on July 5, 2006. “Yes! Yes What is it Dad? Is it a boy or a girl?” Finally the words I had been waiting to hear my entire life.

I was sitting on my front porch when I found out I had a baby sister. My porch is small, just 15 feet by 8 feet. The gray paint chips easily even though my mom repaints every two years. It is filled with old, yard-sale-purchased wicker furniture, hula-hoops, baseball gloves, and the little red Schwinn, the one all four of us Smith kids used when we learned how to ride a bike.

I got married on my front porch, when I was 7, to Philip, my neighbor across the street. The entire family was there, all the neighborhood kids, that is. Hanna married us, Maggie was the flower girl, and Jake was the ring bearer, except there were no rings or flowers.

This past spring some of the neighborhood kids were sitting on the front porch when Hannah came running up the street to tell us she had made her college decision and that she was going to Penn State. There was a round of hugs, cheering, and then we sat there blocking out visions of the day when Hannah would leave for college.

The best place to be on Lenior Ave’s block party day is my front porch. Every Memorial Day my neighborhood drags grills and lawn furniture onto the sidewalks and closes the street for our celebration. There is a tug-of-war in the Carroll’s back yard, a kid versus parents whiffle ball game in the dirt field behind the Ordonio’s and an egg toss in the street. As little kids we sat on the porch and decorated our bikes from the annual block party parade. Now, we decorate the porch with spilled drinks, half eaten hotdogs and chicken wing bones.

There are never enough seats for everyone on the porch. We fit two kids on the rocking chair, five on the couch. The wicker chairs fit only one; thus, the little red Schwinn becomes a seat, and everyone else finds the floor. As we’ve gotten older the conversation on the porch has changed. We used to talk about who was spoiled (the truth is that we’re all spoiled, actually). We talked about middle school and our friends, or at least who they were at that particular moment. As teenagers we talk about the stress of high school, our low paying weekend jobs or important things like, ‘do I want bacon on my hoagie for lunch.’”

The front door opens, and the floorboards creek. My sister walks out and throws her baby doll on the wicker couch as she makes a b-line for her pink scooter lying in the front yard. I hope I am invited to her front porch wedding to Joseph, our neighbor up the street.

## EXAMPLE #2: DISCUSSION

- What is your initial reaction?
- What did you learn about this student?
- What did you enjoy about this essay?
- What didn't you enjoy about this essay?
- Did the applicant come to life?
- Were the ideas presented clearly?
- What essay question did she answer? (Did she answer it effectively?)
- Would you like to see the student on your campus?



# EXAMPLE #3



# EXAMPLE #3

Restaurants treat me like royalty, the lunch room reeks, and Halloween is my least favorite holiday. What's the connection? I have a nut allergy.

My story begins in a bathtub. I was hungry, and my mom fed me peanut butter crackers. Naturally, I gobbled down the snack. Suddenly, things didn't look too good.

My mom called the doctor about my symptoms- my rash, my hives, and a bunch of other nasty things. "Bring her to the pharmacy right away," they said. "Her throat could close up." My mom rushed me to CVS and forced medicine down my throat. The shoppers and staff gave concern and confused looks. Eventually, my mom composed herself and proceeded to pay.

I don't remember any of this; I was only one. As a child, I never saw myself as different. When kids brought cupcakes to school to celebrate their birthdays, I politely declined. When Halloween arrived, I simply gave my candy away. I never once considered what my life would be like without this extra responsibility.

Now that I think about it, Halloween was never that fun for me. Boo. Instead of Halloween, I'd like to think going out to for breakfast was my most food related fun. Scrambled eggs, bacon, pancakes-what could be better? I loved it. Then, one day, a blue peanut M&M made its way into my pancake batter. I discovered this unwelcome fiend only after I had taken a bite and tasted something unusual. Needless to say, my mother and I both got a free breakfast that morning.

The pancake was the restaurant's mistake, but my mom has made mistakes too. JC's, a local ice cream parlor, home of the pistachio soft serve, is within a five minute drive of my house. She purchased some pistachio ice cream for me, and it was fantastic. I ate the whole thing. Oops.

One horrendous rash and a couple of spoonfuls of Benadryl later, I was fine. I learned something new that day: pistachio is a nut. I loved the taste. Sadly, my body hated the protein.

Sophomore year I decided to sign up for AP Biology, supposedly the most rigorous class the school offered. It was brutally painful, but absolutely fascinating. The unit about protein synthesis intrigued me the most- can you guess why?

Genes code for everything that happens in the body. They make proteins and in turn, some of these proteins process other proteins. It's truly amazing how perfectly the system works. But every now and again, people like me have a flaw in their system.

People tend to not understand allergies. They question the amount of food needed to react, the type of reaction, and my emotions towards the whole thing. Am I sad? Do I pity myself? Would I like to have a Reese's? Can they stab me with my epi-pen?

I've had my nut allergy my whole life, and I've gotten along just fine.

## EXAMPLE #3: DISCUSSION

- What is your initial reaction?
- What did you learn about this student?
- What did you enjoy about this essay?
- What didn't you enjoy about this essay?
- Did the applicant come to life?
- Were the ideas presented clearly?
- What essay question did she answer? (Did she answer it effectively?)
- Would you like to see the student on your campus?



# THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAYS

- Answer the question.
- Spend time to consider the questions, to reflect on what you want the admissions office to learn about you.
- Make it specific to the college/university that is asking the question.
- Although these are short answers, spend time writing and editing these answers as well as your longer essay.
- Still use good grammar and strong writing.



# UNION COLLEGE SUPPLEMENT #1

- What stands out to you about Union and what has inspired you to apply? (Limit 150 words)



# A UNION SPECIFIC RESPONSE

- I heard about Union through one of the letters they sent me. At first glance I was skeptical, as many colleges try to over embellish themselves. However, as I began to look more closely, I found more and more aspects of interest to me, such as undergraduate research and studying abroad opportunities. When I went and visited the campus this last summer, I was not disappointed in the least. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised. The campus was more beautiful than the pictures, and the campus is a place I could easily see myself calling home. After interviewing with Mr. Aaron Ray, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that Union would be a great match for me and I needed to apply.



## SUPPLEMENT #2

- Answer one of the following questions:
  - Share something about yourself that does not appear in your application. (Limit 150 words)
  - What question do you think a selective college should ask and how would you answer it? (Limit 150 words)



# A FANTASTIC RESPONSE

- I am a lacrosse player, I like rock music, and I love Downton Abbey. Yes, Downton Abbey might fit into the “Which one of these does not belong category,” but it belongs in my life. The favorite show of the tough guy on the lacrosse team often called “big brownie” or “browntown,” is a soap opera about an early twentieth century British estate. I had my jaw broken by a 101 mile per hour shot in practice last year and didn’t fall down, but I cried when Matthew, my favorite character, died. I think that life is made much more interesting when one diversifies one’s interests.

• CHRIS BROWN – APPLICANT TO UNION COLLEGE 2014



# CLOSING THOUGHTS

- The essay is *one* part of the college application
- The essay question is not intended to trick you
- Humor helps
- Nevertheless, few students are ever denied solely on the basis of a poor essay or admitted entirely because of a brilliant essay.
- The essay should tell who you are so that it distinguishes you from other applicants!
- We love reading your essays and learning more about you!
- The last piece of the puzzle. Keep in mind that the application process is like a jigsaw puzzle. The essay is the one piece that has the potential of completing the picture of who you are and why you wish to attend a particular college
- Proof Read, Proof Read, Proof Read!!!
- Happy writing

