

The background features a stylized illustration of a laptop and a smartphone. The laptop is light gray with a darker gray screen and keyboard. A document with horizontal lines is shown as if it's coming out of the laptop screen. To the left of the laptop is a white smartphone with a dark gray screen.

Nailing

## **The College Application Essays**

Organized. Clear. Specific. Reflective

College**Path** LA

*Connecting Schools & Communities*

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## INTRO

Our experiences working with students have taught us two important lessons. Most students who come to our sessions have never been asked to talk about their lives, and fewer have been asked to write about them. It is not uncommon for students to say, “I don’t know what to write,” or “I don’t have anything interesting to say.” We have also learned that most students, when encouraged by a patient coach, will open up rather quickly. We will give you some tools to do that.

## WHAT DO ADMISSIONS OFFICERS AND READERS LOOK FOR IN AN APPLICATION ESSAY?

“By the time (the application) comes to us, many of them have gone through so many hands that the essays are sanitized. I wish I saw more of a thoughtful voice of a 17-year-old.” - *Gregory Sneed, Denison University, Vice President for Enrollment Management*

“When you’re writing, don’t tell colleges what you think they want to hear and don’t overuse the thesaurus. If you wouldn’t use a word in conversation with your sister, don’t use it. Write as if you were speaking directly to the admissions reader in your own, authentic voice.” - *Sara Harberson, former dean of admissions and financial aid at Franklin & Marshall College*

“A college application essay is your opportunity to share something meaningful about yourself. Tell your story in your own voice and in your own words.” - *Stefanie Niles, Ohio Wesleyan University, Vice President for Enrollment and Communications*

“Be your authentic self! In my experience, essays in which a student has tried to genuinely reflect on a moment when they showed real emotional growth, either through a challenging moment or circumstance, or through an opportunity, are the strongest.” [www.getintocollege.com/blog](http://www.getintocollege.com/blog)

“The topic of the essay doesn’t need to be mind-blowing (in fact, the most mundane topics are often the most relatable and enjoyable), but if it reveals

someone who would be highly valued in our campus community, that could tip the scales.” - John Ambrose, Executive Director of Admissions, Michigan State University

## GETTING STARTED

- Read the questions out loud.
- Identify the questions that instantly click because the student has strong experiences and examples.
- Before the student begins writing, brainstorm, brainstorm, and brainstorm some more. Jot down ideas, anecdotes, and details.

## YOUR TOPIC

- Will be something you have a lot to say about because it springs naturally from your life.
- Tells who you are as a person. What makes you tick? What makes you unique?
- Will have an element of surprise, delight, or conflict that grabs a reader’s attention—like a good book, TV show or movie.
- Tells how your personal experiences and challenges have helped you grow as a person.

## A FEW WORDS ABOUT GOOD WRITING

- Good writing is re-rewriting. Make sure to leave time for multiple revisions. **The best essays go through multiple revisions.**
- Make every sentence clear and crisp. Alternate long sentences with short ones to vary the rhythm.
- Use as few words as possible to convey your thought. **Keep it simple.**

- Begin with a bold statement, a surprise, an image or a description, something to get the attention of the reader. This is often called a hook.
- End with a lesson you have learned or a new insight you have gained.
- Show don't tell through concrete examples and anecdotes. Showing paints a picture that readers can see in their minds' eye. Showing illustrates, while telling states. Here are a few examples:

- 1) The room is hot and stuffy, and paint is chipping off the walls. The smell of my grandma's cooking wafts into the living room where all fifteen of us are gathered. I can hear the sounds of my little cousins playing and screaming in my grandma's bedroom. The hum of Spanish and English garbled together in the living room. My world is my family and although they don't understand it, I feel like it is time for me to venture out.
- 2) I haven't had many positive influences in my life. My father was never around while I was growing up. He was a drug dealer for almost all of my life. The path he chose put not only himself in jeopardy, but me as well. He didn't worry about the consequences of his actions; he only looked at what he was gaining from it. My father never stopped to think how his decisions would have a lasting effect on me.
- 3) Many things about my background make me a comparatively generic applicant. I am a Caucasian, 17-year-old from Los Angeles with two siblings. In fact, when I had a dog and my dad carried a briefcase all that was missing was a white picket fence! Today, however, there are two major things about myself that I feel set me apart.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER DURING THE WRITING PROCESS

- Summarize the theme/main idea of the essay in one or two sentences.

- Read the essay out loud. Does the theme shine through? Is the theme buried? If so, how can it be fixed? Is the essay supported by personal anecdotes, facts, description, and examples?
- Check the word length. The essay must not exceed the maximum length.
- Make sure the student has responded to the prompt.

## UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Personal Insight Questions Choose any 4 of the 8 questions. Each essay is limited to 350 words. **All questions are equal in the application review process.**

Remember, the personal questions are just that — personal. This means you should use our guidance for each question as a suggestion in case you need help. The important thing is expressing who you are, what matters to you and what you want to share.

- 1. Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes or contributed to group efforts over time.**

Things to consider: A leadership role can mean more than just a title. It can mean being a mentor to others, acting as the person in charge of a specific task, or taking the lead role in organizing an event or project. Think about what you accomplished and what you learned from the experience. What were your responsibilities?

- 2. Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.**

Things to consider: What does creativity mean to you? Do you have a creative skill that is important to you? What have you been able to do

with that skill? If you used creativity to solve a problem, what was your solution? What are the steps you took to solve the problem?

**3. What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?**

Things to consider: If there's a talent or skill that you're proud of, this is the time to share it. You don't necessarily have to be recognized or have received awards for your talent (although if you did and you want to talk about it, feel free to do so). Why is this talent or skill meaningful to you?

**4. Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.**

Things to consider: An educational opportunity can be anything that has added value to your educational experience and better prepared you for college. For example, participation in an honors or academic enrichment program, or enrollment in an academy that's geared toward an occupation or a major or taking advanced courses that interest you — just to name a few.

**5. Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?**

Things to consider: A challenge could be personal, or something you have faced in your community or school. Why was the challenge significant to you? This is a good opportunity to talk about any obstacles you've faced and what you've learned from the experience. Did you have support from someone else or did you handle it alone?

**6. Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.**

Things to consider: Many students have a passion for one specific academic subject area, something that they just can't get enough of. If that applies to you, what have you done to further that interest? Discuss how your interest in the subject developed and describe any experience you have had inside and outside the classroom — such as volunteer work, internships, employment, summer programs, participation in student organizations and/or clubs — and what you have gained from your involvement.

**7. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?**

Things to consider: Think of community as a term that can encompass a group, team or a place — like your high school, hometown or home. You can define community as you see fit, just make sure you talk about your role in that community. Was there a problem that you wanted to fix in your community?

**8. Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admission to the University of California?**

Things to consider: If there's anything you want us to know about you but didn't find a question or place in the application to tell us, now's your chance. What have you not shared with us that will highlight a skill, talent, challenge or opportunity that you think will help us know you better?

Source: <https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-freshman/personal-insight-questions.html>

## THE COMMON APPLICATION – PRIVATE COLLEGES

Choose one. 650 word limit.

- 1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, please share your story.**

Things to consider: This is your chance to tell us about something genuinely meaningful and unique about you. Whether it be your love of superheroes, passion for baking, or personal reflections on identity, anything is fair game as long as it conveys who you are and what you believe in.

- 2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

Things to consider: Sometimes students are confused by this prompt. If you're trying to show colleges your best self, why would you willingly acknowledge a time you struggled? 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 you and your perspective changed as a result.

- 3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?**

Things to consider: Choose this prompt if you have a relevant—and very specific—experience to recount and reflect on. You can write about a time you stood up to others or share an experience when your own values were challenged. No vague essays about hot button issues!

- 4. 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 you or motivated you?**

Things to consider: This essay is designed to get at the heart of how you react and respond when you are the recipient of something meaningful. What role does gratitude play in your life and how does it inspire and motivate you? Remember, this essay needs to focus on how you process, appreciate and draw inspiration from the actions of others.

- 5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.**

Things to consider: Just like Prompt #2, the accomplishment or event you write about can be anything from a major milestone to a smaller "aha" moment. Colleges are looking for a sense of maturity and introspection—pinpoint the transformation and demonstrate your personal growth. What did you learn and how did it change you?

- 6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging 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?**

Things to consider: Think of this as an invitation to write about something you care about. Colleges are looking for curious students, who are thoughtful about the world around them. Make sure you answer all parts of this prompt.

- 7. 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.**

Things to consider: This question might be for you if you have a dynamo personal essay from English class to share or were really inspired by a question from another college's application. You can even write your own

question! Since there isn't a prompt to guide you, you must ask yourself the questions, how and why, that will help you get at the heart of the story you want to tell.

\*The following question is **optional** and appears in the "Additional Information" section of the application. 250 word limit.

- 8. Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.**

Things to consider: Remember that all students have lived through the pandemic. What do you want the college to know about your experience?

Source: <https://www.princetonreview.com/college-advice/application-essay-topics>

## MANY PRIVATE COLLEGES ASK THIS ADDITIONAL QUESTION

### **Why Us? Why are you a perfect match for this college?**

Things to consider: What makes this college unique and why is it a good fit? Research is critical! Spend time on the college website. Review the course catalogue, professors, majors/minors, first year requirements, activities and clubs and Greek life. Read student reviews on niche.com and unigo.com. Read what the experts say in the Fiske College Guide, Colleges that Change Lives by Loren Pope and CollegeXPress.com. Take virtual tours on Youtube.com

## CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY -EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM (EOP)

### What is EOP?

The primary goal of the CSU Educational Opportunity Program is to improve access for low-income, first generation and historically disadvantaged students with potential for academic success by making higher education a possibility.

Below are five questions you must answer and add to your application. Two important things to keep in mind when writing your responses:

- 1) Write a lot of detail. Don't assume the reader will figure it out.
- 2) Use "I" statements ("I take care of my little brother and help with his online schooling") and not "we" statements. All responses must be about you and not someone else, even if your grandmother inspired you.

### **1. Briefly describe your family's economic background. Include information about your financial challenges. (2500 characters)**

Leave the shame behind. Include your family's income history. This is especially applicable if your family is middle to low income and the income is inconsistent. State what type of work your parents do. Do you or your siblings help with finances? Have your siblings had to drop out of school to help? Do you live in a single parent household? Are your parents' immigrants? Are you in the foster system?

### **2. Why would you like to attend college? Discuss your career and personal goals. Are there any particular circumstances, school experiences, or persons that influenced your preparation or motivation to attend college (e.g., cultural/financial background, family, teachers, schools you attended)? Please explain. (2500 characters)**

This is a three-part question. Focus on each part as follows:

- 1) Discuss your reasons for wanting to attend college. Is it to improve your family's economic status; gain a dream career; foster your love for learning; provide an opportunity to better yourself?
  - 2) The second part asks what you want to achieve for yourself. Do you want to be a role model for your family; become a doctor; help your community, etc.
  - 3) What inspired you to go to college. Were you inspired by watching your parents work hard for very little; did you have a teacher or counselor that opened your eyes to college; did your parents emphasize the importance of college; did you read a book or watch a movie that made you want to go to college; did you grow up with immigrant parents?
- 3. Briefly discuss your academic background. Did you utilize any additional support at your high school, such as tutoring? Do your grades in high school and/or college reflect your academic ability or potential? (2500 characters)**

This is a three-part question. Address each one in detail as follows:

- 1) Academic background relates to courses you have and have not taken. Explain your reasons for taking or not taking certain classes. Which were the most challenging? Were you unaware of the importance of taking classes? Was there a scheduling conflict? Were you unaware the classes were being offered? This is also your chance to explain why you received a poor grade in a class.
- 2) When writing about additional support, did you go to tutoring, watch YouTube videos, use Khan Academy, ask counselors/teachers for help?
- 3) Do you believe that your grades reflect your academic ability or predict your performance as a college student? Why or why not? Some students have a below average GPA, but they can succeed in college. If this is you, here is your chance to explain why your grades do not demonstrate this.

**4. List any volunteer, extracurricular activities, or work experience in which you are or have been involved in the past two years. (2500 characters)**

Include all the activities you have participated in virtually or in person during your first three years of high school, including those you plan on participating in during your senior year. Include home responsibilities such as tutoring or taking care of siblings. Be detailed. Provide dates (month and year), hours per week, total hours, major projects/events led by you. If you don't have examples, you need to explain why.

**5. Please tell us more about yourself. Is there any additional information you would like EOP to consider in determining your admission to the program? (2500 characters)**

This is your final chance to add something new about yourself not already expressed in previous answers, or elaborate on points you have made in your answers. For example, you can expand on your academic weaknesses, concerns about specific academic subjects, need for tutoring, fear of dropping out of college to help your family, worry that you won't be successful. Express weaknesses and/or any academic and personal needs/concerns not already addressed in previous answers.

Source: <https://www2.calstate.edu/attend/student-services/eop/apply-to-eop/Pages/default.aspx>  
<https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/1073/CSU%20EOP%20Question%20Response%20Guidelines.pdf>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### College Application Essays

- <https://www.collegeessayguy.com/>
- [www.essayhell.com](http://www.essayhell.com)
- "Crafting an Unforgettable College Essay," Princeton Review.  
<https://www.princetonreview.com/college-advice/college-essay>
- Here's What Admissions Officers Look for in a College Essay.  
<https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/talk-with-an-admissions-officer/>

### College Articles

- Peterson's Blog. [www.petersons.com/blog](http://www.petersons.com/blog)
- Georgia Tech Admissions Blog. <https://sites.gatech.edu/admission-blog/>

### Researching College Websites

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW9BSLheevw>