

Common App Essay Brainstorming

A guided worksheet to generate strong essay ideas for the Common Application prompts.

How to use this resource

Pick 1-2 prompts that feel most natural. Spend 10-15 minutes on the brainstorming activity, then use the lines provided to capture examples, stories, and details you could build into an essay. Aim for specifics (names, moments, choices) rather than general statements.

Tip: If you get stuck, write the "messy" version first. You can always refine later.

Prompt 1

Prompt:

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.

Brainstorming

activity:

What five adjectives best describe who you are as a person. Write 2-3 sentences for each to explain why those five words describe you. Look at your adjectives. Do any of them count as an identity interest or talent? Do any of them stem from a specific background?

Prompt 2

Prompt:

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?

Brainstorming

activity:

Obstacles big and small can teach us lessons. Take a moment toward the end of each day to write a paragraph about one obstacle that you faced and how you overcame it or how you're planning to overcome it.

Prompt 3

Prompt:

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

Brainstorming activity:

Write down three of your strongest held beliefs. Think about why you hold them so strongly. Oftentimes the things we believe the strongest are the ones that have been the most challenged and have come out on top time and again. Now write down three beliefs you have that you think might change in your lifetime. What might cause you to change your mind about them?

Prompt 4

Prompt:

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?

Brainstorming activity:

Keep a gratitude journal for one week. Each day write down 2-3 people or things for whom you're grateful. Do you notice any people or things coming up often? Is acknowledging your gratitude causing you to act any differently in that week?

Prompt 5

Prompt:

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

Brainstorming activity:

Personal growth can be hard to measure. Go ask the people who have known you the longest what attributes they have seen you grow into. You might talk to your parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles or teachers, coaches, and mentors who have known you for more than a year. You could also talk to a faith leader or a boss. Write down their answers and look for a theme.

Prompt 6

Prompt:

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?

Brainstorming

activity:

If you had to stand up in two minutes and give a 10-minute speech about something you are interested in, what would you talk about? What would you say? Outline your speech below. That topic is likely something you could talk about for this essay.