

Presenting Your Best Self #4: Choosing the Right Prompt

Common Application vs. Coalition for College prompts: *The Common Application offers seven different prompts, while the Coalition for College offers just five. The specified length for Common Application prompts is between 250 and 650 words, while the Coalition for College suggests 500 to 550 words.*

First tip: *Though Coalition prompts are varied, Common Application prompts tend to be more clearly articulated. And since the final Coalition prompt allows you to submit an essay on a topic of your own choice, why not select one of the first six Common Application prompts? (But avoid the seventh one.)*

Second tip: *Even if you select a Common Application prompt, follow the Coalition's suggested length so that you can proceed to write just one essay, not two separate ones. There is absolutely no need to aim for the full 650 words for a Common Application prompt; 500 to 550 words are not merely adequate, they are for most students ideal. More is not necessarily better; less can be more.*

Prompt-by-prompt notes: *What follows is a list of all prompts with observations, in bold, from our coaching experiences with more than 650 Chicagoland students.*

2020-2021 Common Application prompts (250-650 words)

1. 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. **Call this prompt "Old Faithful." It has been around for years and is a solid go-to. Remember, however, to choose your story based on the personal attributes you intend to demonstrate or reveal.**
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? **Watch out. Your definition of "challenge, setback, or failure" always runs the risk of personal judgment from college admissions readers. This prompt conceals the trap that your topic may be deemed insufficient. Remember, too, that no one likes a whiner.**
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome? **First off, your "belief or idea" doesn't have to be deep and profound. And then this prompt allows you to share your story unchronologically, for 1) the time you questioned, 2) what prompted your thinking, and 3) the outcome can be ordered any which way.**

4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma—anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution. **This prompt is actually cooler than it initially seems, which is rather geeky. The problem you describe need not be solving hunger, war, or disease; it can and should be scaled to you.**
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others. **Always a worthy choice, this prompt assumes that personal growth *and* (not *or*) new understanding happened.**
6. 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 whom do you turn to when you want to learn more? **The keys to addressing this prompt are 1) “captivation factor” and 2) the second question about learning more. You must account for both.**
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. **Don't fall for this one. Why would you instinctively trust your own personal preference when the previous six prompts offer you such variety and direction? And don't even think about submitting creative writing, since it only rarely reveals your attributes.**

2020-2021 Coalition Application Essay prompts (500 to 550 words)

1. Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it. **This prompt combines elements of Common App 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Make it easier on yourself and choose one of them instead.**
2. Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution. **This prompt can possibly entrap you, for what exactly is “the greater good”? It invites the reader to judge not only your “contribution” but, perhaps more significantly, your identification of “the greater good.”**
3. Has there been a time when you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs? **This prompt is the nearly identical to Common App 3. Note the slightly different wording.**
4. What is the hardest part of being a teenager right now? What's the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (assuming they would listen to you)? **This prompt enables you to pontificate like a pundit. The parenthetical caveat is empty and superfluous. Think twice before taking the bait.**
5. Submit an essay on a topic of your own choice. **And this prompt is why we suggest you choose Common App 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.**