

## Phase Three Guide

### Compose TWO strong college application essays based upon the Common App prompts.

To complete phase three, you must:

1. Choose two essay prompts out of the six provided.
2. For each of the two prompts, you must write a 250-500 word essay.
3. Show it to a trusted friend or adult for suggestions on ideas, and edit/revise as needed for a strong final draft.
4. Print a final draft in MLA format to submit in your Step II Portfolio.

In this document, you will find tools to help you complete Phase Three. Included here are tips for each essay prompt, sample essays for *some* essay prompts, and critiques for the sample essays. If you need additional support for the essays, a simple Google search will yield very helpful results. Completion of these essays will prepare you for applying to scholarships, college, internships, and supplemental programs.

#### Supplemental Article:

### The Common Application Essay Requirements for 2012 – 2013

By Allen Grove, About.com Guide, May 15, 2012

The Common Application gained 37 new members for the upcoming application cycle. That brings the total number of colleges and universities that accept the Common Application close to 500. A growing number are public institutions. Most of the country's top universities and top liberal arts colleges accept the Common Application.

The Common Application evolves from year to year in an effort to best meet the admissions needs of member institutions. For the 2012 - 2013 application cycle, however, the changes are minor. Like last year, the essay needs to be in the 250 to 500 word length. It's a decision that has many critics -- 500 words isn't much space in which to present a fleshed-out idea - - but the hope is that admissions officers won't have to slog through so many long, rambling, poorly edited essays (learn more in this article on essay length).

The Common Application will go live on August 1st, but some applicants may want to start thinking about the essay before then. The actual essay options have not changed since last year.

In 250 to 500 words, students should respond to one of these prompts:

**Essay Prompt #1:** Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

**Essay Prompt #2:** Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.

**Essay Prompt #3:** Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

**Essay Prompt #4:** Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

**Essay Prompt #5:** A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

**Essay Prompt #6:** Topic of your choice.

## **Essay Prompt #1: Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.**

Before responding to the first essay option on the common application, be sure to consider the 5 tips below. Option 1 asks: Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

### 1. "Evaluate" -- Make Sure Your Response is Analytical

Read the prompt for option #1 carefully -- you need to "evaluate" an experience, achievement, risk or dilemma. Evaluation requires you to think critically and analytically about your topic. The admissions folks are not asking you to "describe" or "summarize" an experience (although you'll need to do this a little). The heart of your essay needs to be a thoughtful discussion of how the experience affected you. Examine how the experience made you grow and change as a person.

### 2. A "Significant" Experience Can Be Small

Many students shy away from personal essay option 1 because of the word "significant." Many students feel that they are just 18 years old and nothing "significant" has ever happened to them. This isn't true. If you're 18 years old, even if your life has been smooth and comfortable, you've had significant experiences. Think about the first time you challenged authority, the first time you disappointed your parents or the first time you pushed yourself to do something outside of your comfort zone. A significant risk can be choosing to study drawing; it doesn't have to be about rappelling into an icy chasm to rescue a baby polar bear.

### 3. Don't Brag About an "Achievement"

The admissions team gets a lot of essays from students about the winning goal, the record-breaking run, the brilliant job in the school play, the stunning violin solo or the amazing job they did as team captain. These topics are fine for essay option 1, but you want to be very careful to avoid sounding like a braggart or egoist. The tone of such essays is critical. An essay that says "the team never could have won without me" is going to rub your reader the wrong way. A college doesn't want a community of self-consumed egoists. The best essays have a generosity of spirit and an appreciation of community and team effort.

### 4. An "Ethical Dilemma" Doesn't Need to be Newsworthy

Think broadly about what can be defined as an "ethical dilemma." This topic doesn't need to be about whether or not to support war, abortion or capital punishment. In fact, the huge topics that dominate national debate will often miss the point of the essay question -- the "impact on you." The most difficult ethical dilemmas facing high school students are often about high school. Should you turn in a friend who cheated? Is loyalty to your friends more important than honesty? Should you risk your own comfort or reputation to do what you think is right? Tackling these personal dilemmas in your essay will give the admissions folks a good sense of who you are, and you will be addressing issues that are central to being a good campus citizen.

### 5. Reveal Your Character

Always keep in mind why colleges require admissions essays. Sure, they want to see that you can write, but the essay isn't always the best tool for that (it's obviously easy to get professional help with grammar and mechanics). The main purpose of the essay is so that the school can learn more about you. It's the only place on the application where you can really demonstrate your character, your personality, your sense of humor and your values. The admissions folks want to find evidence that you will be a contributing member of the campus community. They want to see evidence of a team spirit, humility, self-awareness and introspection. Essay option #1 works well for these goals if you thoughtfully explore the "impact on you."

**Essay Prompt #1:** Drew wrote the following college admissions personal essay for question #1 on the Common Application: "Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you." After reading the essay, be sure to read the critique.

### The Job I Should Have Quit

You can learn a lot about me from a quick glance in my closet. You'll find no clothes, but shelves filled with motorized Lego kits, Erector sets, model rockets, remote control race cars, and boxes full of motors, wires, batteries, propellers, soldering irons and hand tools. I've always enjoyed building things. No one was surprised when I decided to apply to college for mechanical engineering.

When last May a friend of my father's asked me if I wanted a summer job working for his machining company, I jumped at the opportunity. I would learn how to use computer-operated lathes and milling machines, I would gain valuable hands-on experience for my college studies, and I'd get a good line on my resumé.

Within hours of beginning my new job, I learned that my father's friend was a subcontractor for the military. The components I'd be making would be used in military vehicles. After that first day of work, I had many conflicting thoughts. I'm firmly against the United States' overuse of military might in the world theater. I'm a big critic of our mismanaged involvement in Iraq. I'm appalled by the number of lives that have been lost in the Middle East, many of them young Americans like myself. I want our troops to have the best equipment they can, but I also believe that our possession of the best military equipment makes us more likely to go to war. Military technology continues to grow more lethal, and technological developments create a never-ending cycle of military escalation.

Did I want to be part of this cycle? To this day I still weigh the ethical dilemma of my summer work. Were I to not do the job, the vehicle components would still be produced. Also, the parts I was making were for support vehicles, not assault weaponry. It's even possible that my work would be saving lives, not endangering them. On the other hand, nuclear bombs and missile guidance systems were all created by scientists and engineers with good intentions. I'm convinced that even the most innocent involvement in the science of war makes one complicit in war itself.

I considered quitting the job. Were I true to my ideals, I really should have walked away and spent the summer mowing lawns or bagging groceries. My parents argued in favor of the machinist job. They made valid points about the value of the experience and the ways that it would lead to bigger opportunities in the future.

In the end I kept the job, partly from my parents' advice and partly from my own desire to be doing real engineering work. Looking back, I think my decision was one of convenience and cowardice. I didn't want to insult my father's friend. I didn't want to disappoint my parents. I didn't want to let a professional opportunity slip away. I didn't want to mow lawns.

But what does my decision say about the future? My summer job made me recognize that the military is a big employer of engineers, whether directly or indirectly. Undoubtedly I'll be confronting similar yet more serious ethical decisions in the future. What if my first job offer has a stunning salary and interesting engineering challenges, but the employer is a defense contractor like Lockheed or Raytheon? Will I turn down the job, or will I once again compromise my ideals? I may even face such conflicts during college. Many engineering professors work under military grants, so my college research and internships could get entangled in messy ethical dilemmas.

I'm hoping I'll make a better decision the next time my ideals are challenged. If nothing else, my summer job has made me more aware of the types of information I want to collect before I accept a job and arrive at my first day of work. What I learned about myself during my summer work wasn't exactly flattering. Indeed, it makes me realize that I need college so that I can develop not just my engineering skills, but also my ethical reasoning and leadership skills. I like to think that in the future I'll use my engineering skills to better the world and tackle noble causes like climate change and sustainability. My bad decision this past summer has inspired me to look ahead and find ways to make my ideals and my love of engineering work together.

## **Essay Prompt #1: Critique of Drew's essay:**

*The significant experience topic on the Common Application raises unique issues that are discussed in these 5 writing tips. Like all college admissions essays, however, essays for Common Application option #1 must accomplish a specific task: they must be written clearly and tightly, and they must provide evidence that the writer has the intellectual curiosity, open-mindedness and the strength of character necessary to be a contributing and successful member of the campus community.*

### The Title

*Drew's title is rather straight-forward, but it is also quite effective. We immediately want to know why Drew should have quit this job. We also want to know why he didn't quit the job. Also, the title captures a key element of Drew's essay -- Drew is not writing about a great success he had, but a personal failure. His approach carries with it a little risk, but it is also a refreshing change from all the essays about how great the writer is.*

### The Topic

*Most applicants think they have to make themselves look super-human or infallible in their essays. The admissions folks read scores of essays on "significant events" in which the writer describes a winning touchdown, a brilliant moment of leadership, a perfectly executed solo, or the happiness brought to the less-fortunate by an act of charity.*

*Drew does not go down this predictable road. At the heart of Drew's essay is a failure -- he acted in a way that did not live up to his personal ideals. He chose convenience and self-advancement over his values, and he emerges from his ethical dilemma thinking he did the wrong thing.*

*One could argue that Drew's approach to the essay is foolish. Does a top college really want to admit a student who so easily compromises his values?*

*But let's think of the issue differently. Does a college want to admit all those students whose essays present them as braggarts and egoists? Drew's essay has a pleasing level of self awareness and self criticism. We all make mistakes, and Drew owns up to his. He is disturbed by his decision, and his essay explores his inner conflicts. Drew is not perfect -- none of us are -- and he is refreshingly up front about this fact. Drew has room to grow and he knows it.*

*Also, Drew's essay isn't just about his faulty decision. It also presents his strengths -- he is passionate about mechanical engineering and has been for most of his life. The essay succeeds in showing off his strengths at the very time it examines his weaknesses. Essay option #1 often leads to a bunch of predictable and conventional essays, but Drew's will stand out from the rest of the pile.*

### The Tone

*Drew is a fairly serious and introspective guy, so we don't find much humor in his essay. At the same time, the writing isn't too heavy. The opening description of Drew's closet and the repeated mention of mowing lawns add a little lightness to the writing. Most importantly, the essay manages to convey a level of humility that is refreshing. Drew comes across as a decent person, someone who we'd like to get to know better.*

### The Writing

*Drew's essay has been carefully edited and revised. It contains no glaring problems with grammar and style. The language is tight and the details are well chosen. The prose is tight with a good variety of sentence structure. Immediately Drew's essay tells the admissions folks that he is in control of his writing and ready for the challenges of college-level work. The length of the essay is also good. Drew's piece comes in around 730 words. The admissions officers have thousands of essays to process, so we want to keep the essay short. Drew's response gets the job done effectively without rambling on. The admissions folks are unlikely to lose interest. Like Carrie's essay, Drew's keeps it short and sweet.*

### Final Thoughts

*As you write your essay, you should think about the impression you leave your reader with. Drew's does an excellent job on this front. Here's a student who already has great mechanical ability and a love for engineering. He is humble and reflective. He is willing to take risks, and even risks critiquing the source of funding for some college professors. We leave the essay understanding Drew's values, his doubts and his passions.*

*Most importantly, Drew comes across as the type of person who has a lot to gain from college as well as a lot to contribute. The admissions personnel are likely to want him to be part of their community.*

**Essay Prompt #2: Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.**

Before responding to the second essay option on the common application, be sure to consider the 5 tips below.

1. Be Sure to "Discuss"

Be sure to read the question carefully. The common application is not asking you to "describe" or "summarize" an issue. So, if the bulk of your essay is describing the terrible conditions in Darfur, you are not answering the question. To "discuss" something you need to think critically and write analytically.

2. Focusing Close to Home is Often Better

The admissions office gets lots of essays on big, newsworthy issues like the war in Iraq, the fight against terror and U.S. dependence on fossil fuels. In truth, however, these giant and complex issues often don't impact our immediate lives as much as more local and personal issues. Since colleges want to get to know you through your essay, be sure to focus on an issue that will actually teach them something about you.

3. Don't Lecture Your Audience

The admissions officers don't want to be lectured on the evils of global warming or the cons of world trade. Save that writing for a paper in your college Political Science class. The heart of an essay on option #2 needs to be about you, so make sure your writing is as much personal as it is political.

4. Give Emphasis to "The Importance to You"

The end of the prompt for option #2 asks you to discuss the issue's "importance to you." Don't short change this essential part of the question. Whatever issue you discuss, you want to make sure that it truly is important to you and that your essay reveals why it is important to you. A good essay on this option reveals the person behind the writing.

5. Show Why You'd Be a Good Choice for the College

Trust me -- the common application doesn't include option #2 because colleges want to learn about world issues. Colleges want to learn about you, and they want to see evidence that you will add value to the campus community. The essay is really the only place in the application where you can highlight your convictions and personality. As you discuss an issue, make sure you reveal yourself to be the type of thoughtful, introspective, passionate and generous person who will make an ideal campus citizen.

**Essay Prompt #2:** Sophie wrote the following essay for question #2 on the Common Application: "Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you."

The Allegany County Youth Board

I am not entirely sure how I ended up on the Allegany County Youth Board. I know my parents' friend recruited my mom after an older Board member retired, and he told her to ask me if I had any interest in becoming a youth member as there was no one yet to represent our district. I said sure, but wished I hadn't after the first meeting, during which a bunch of people my parents' age and older sat around discussing 'allocations' and 'subsidies.' "Nothing got done," I complained to my mom afterwards. I had thought politics was exciting; I had thought that there would be fiery debate, patriotic vehemence. I was disappointed, and I didn't want to go back.

I did go back, however. At first it was my mom's nagging that made me go. The more I went, though, the more I understood what people were saying and the more interesting it all was. I began to get a sense of how things worked on a board. I learned when to talk and when not to, and even occasionally added some input of my own. Soon it was I who nagged my mom to attend.

It was in one of our recent meetings that I got a taste of the heated discussions of my initial preconception. A Christian-based organization was requesting a grant to build a skate park and the head of the project was due to present her proposal. Although the Youth Board is a government entity and funded by taxpayer money, it is not unusual for funds to be allotted to religious groups, as long as it is clear that the grant will be used for non-religious purposes. For instance, the organization Youth for Christ receives public money each year for their recreation programs aimed at getting kids off the streets and providing alternatives to delinquent behavior. These projects, including a skate park like the one in question, are separate from the group's religious objectives and programs.

The woman who presented to us was in her thirties or forties and was, a board member told us, "a person of few words." From what she did say it was clear that she was poorly educated, that she was steady in her convictions and sincere in her desire to help, and that she was utterly naive about how to get the money she wanted for her program. It was this naivety, perhaps, that gave painful honesty to her words. We questioned her on whether kids of any faith would be allowed to skate there. They would, but they would be encouraged to "find God." Would there be any religious lessons taught? The lessons were separate; they didn't have to stay for them. They would be at the same place and at the same time, though. Would there be religious pamphlets or posters? Yes. What if a child didn't want to convert? Would they be made to? No, that would be left up to God.

After she left a heated debate ensued. On one side were my parents' friend, my mom, and me; on the other side were everyone else. It seemed clear that this proposition overstepped the line--the director had stated explicitly that it was a ministry. If the proposal were carried out, however, the skate park would be a great asset to her town, and the truth is that pretty much all of Allegany County is Protestant anyway. In all likelihood the skate park/ministry would only benefit the community, and in a town of under 2000 people with nearly 15% of them below the poverty line, they need all they can get.

I am no Machiavelli. The ends do not always justify the means. What we seemed to be looking at was the question of whether to endorse a program that promoted a religion. On principle I could not agree with this. Even if in this case the result could be positive, it violated the guarantee of separation of church and state. I believe that any infringement of this, no matter how trivial, undermines the government's claim to neutrality. Furthermore, we needed to be aware not only of the situation at hand but also of the precedent set for future situations.

But then the decision that seemed so clear to me became hazier. There was more than a month between the presentation and the vote on whether to fund the project. I kept thinking of my experience of the previous summer, working as a counselor at Camp New Horizons. The camp serves kids in Cattaraugus County who have emotional or behavioral problems, often due to poverty, and it is funded by the state. One of the first things I noticed when I got there was the prayer before each meal. This seemed inappropriate to me, since it is a publicly funded camp. I asked returning counselors if the kids were required to say the grace. They gave me confused looks. I explained that I, for instance, am an atheist and would feel uncomfortable saying grace. They wanted to know why it mattered to me if I didn't believe in God. "I don't lack belief in God," I tried to tell them. "I believe in a lack of God." "Wait until the kids get here," they said. "It'll make sense."

After three weeks with those kids, it sure did make sense. Each camper had a story, a strung-out newspaper clipping of tragedy. The only routines they had created for themselves were tantrums, violence, and running away. One girl, for example, would throw a fit between four thirty and five o' clock every day without fail. She would get angry about some minor frustration, sulk for a while, then work herself into such a frenzy that she would have to be restrained. She needed stability in her life, and these outbursts provided routine. Saying grace before meals became part of the pattern of life at camp, and the campers loved it just for that.

They had to make it from one day to the next, and it wasn't going to be separation of church and state that saved their lives. What of it if there was a picture of Jesus painted on the wall of their skate park? They needed routine, focus, and gentle transitions. The simple prayer gave them these. It wasn't out to convert kids or go against their upbringing. By the end of camp, I was the only one converted - converted to the notion of practicality over principle.

And yet, when it came time for the vote, I voted against the proposal. In a way it was a cop out, since I knew that the skate park would win even with my vote against it, which it did, by a narrow margin. I wanted the skate park to be built, but I was concerned about the precedent of funding religious projects. Thankfully, I was able to vote on principle without sacrificing the community benefit. I am still not sure what I believe is right in this case, but at this point in my life I like being unsure. Uncertainty leaves room for growth, change, and learning. I like that.

## **Essay Prompt #2: Critique of Sophie's essay:**

*Before I get into the details of the essay, it's important to look at the schools to which Sophie applied: Bard College, Dickinson College, Hampshire College, Oberlin College, Smith College, SUNY Geneseo and Wesleyan University. Each of these, including the one state school, is a relatively small college with an undergraduate focus and a liberal arts and sciences core curriculum. All of these schools use a holistic approach to their admissions decisions; that is, each school is carefully thinking about the whole applicant, not just the applicant's grades and test scores. These are schools that are looking for more than smart students. They also want excellent campus citizens who will foster an open and questioning intellectual community. For this reason, the essay is a remarkably important part of Sophie's application.*

### The Topic

*Don't be misled by Sophie's focus on a local and rural issue. At the heart of the essay is a discussion of big questions: separation of church and state, conflicts between personal convictions and the good of the community, and the gray areas that define all politics.*

*Sophie has taken some risks in choosing this topic. Her declared atheism might alienate some readers. From her opening line ("I am not entirely sure") she presents herself as someone who does not have all the answers. Indeed, Sophie is not the hero of this story. She's not even convinced that she made the right decision, and her vote did not affect the outcome of the situation.*

### The Tone

*These risks are what make the essay effective. Put yourself in the shoes of an admissions officer at a liberal arts college. What kind of student do you want as part of your campus community? One with all the answers, who knows everything, never makes wrong decisions and seems to have nothing to learn?*

*Clearly not. Sophie presents herself as someone who is continually learning, rethinking her convictions and embracing her uncertainty. It's important to note that Sophie does have strong convictions, but she is open-minded enough to challenge them. The essay shows Sophie to be an engaged, thoughtful and questioning community member. She takes on challenges, sticks with her convictions, yet she does so with pleasing open-mindedness and humility. In short, she demonstrates the qualities that are a great match for a small liberal arts college.*

### The Writing

*As you read Sophie's essay, one problem probably jumped out when you reached the second page: it's too long (Lora's essay has the same problem). Somewhere in the 500 to 900 word range should be the target for an admission essay. Sophie's essay is up around 1,200 words. This is a real problem. Admissions folks have thousands of essays to read, so a 1,200-word piece isn't going to be a welcome sight. What could Sophie have cut? Perhaps the side-story of Camp New Horizons needs to go. Perhaps a sentence could be cut here and there, especially in the first half of the essay.*

*I do think the opening could use a bit more work. The second sentence is a little long and clumsy, and that opening paragraph needs to really grab the reader.*

*That said, the writing itself is mostly excellent. The essay is largely free of grammatical or typographical errors. The prose is clear and fluid. Sophie does a nice job shifting between short, punchy sentences ("I am no Machiavelli") and longer, more complex ones. The essay, despite its length, holds the reader's attention.*

### Final Thoughts

*I like Sophie's essay because the focus is local. Many college applicants worry that they have nothing to say, that nothing significant has happened to them. Sophie shows us that one need not have climbed Mount Everest, experienced great personal tragedy or found a cure for cancer to write an effective essay.*

*Sophie grapples with tough issues and shows herself to be eager to learn. She also demonstrates strong writing skills. She successfully presents herself as a good match for a competitive liberal arts college.*

### **Essay Prompt #3: Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.**

Before responding to the third essay option on the common application, be sure to consider the 6 tips below. Option 3 asks: Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

#### 1. Push the Language in This Option

I've never been a fan of the wording of essay option #3, for if you followed the guidelines too literally, you would end up with a bland essay. The words "indicate" and "describe" suggest that your essay does not need to demonstrate any critical thought. However, a good response to #3 does far more than "describe" a person's influence on you. You should examine why the person was influential to you, and you should analyze the ways in which you have changed because of your relationship with the person.

#### 2. Think Twice About Essays on Mom or Dad

There is nothing wrong with writing about one of your parents for this essay, but make sure your relationship with your parent is unusual and compelling in some way. The admissions folks get a lot of essays that focus on a parent, and your writing won't stand out if you simply make generic points about parenting. If you find yourself making points like "my Dad was a great role model" or "my mother always pushed me to do my best," rethink your approach to the question. Consider the millions of students who could write the exact same essay.

#### 3. Don't Be Star Struck

In most cases, you should avoid writing an essay about the lead singer in your favorite band or the movie star who you idolize. Such essays can be okay if handled well, but often the writer ends up sounding like a pop culture junkie rather than a thoughtful independent thinker.

#### 4. Obscure Subject Matter is Fine

Be sure to read Max's essay on option #3. Max writes about a rather unremarkable junior high kid he encountered while teaching summer camp. The essay succeeds in part because the choice of subject matter is unusual and obscure. Among a million application essays, Max's will be the only one to focus on this young boy. Also, the boy isn't even a role model. Instead, he's an ordinary kid who inadvertently makes Max challenge his preconceptions.

#### 5. The "Significant Influence" Need Not Be Positive

The majority of essays written for option #3 are about role models: "my Mom/Dad/brother/friend/teacher/neighbor/coach taught me to be a better person through his or her great example..." Such essays are often excellent, but they are also a bit predictable. This essay, however, is about a "significant" influence, not necessarily a "positive" influence. Max's essay focuses on a kid who is explicitly not a role model. You could even write about someone who is abusive or hateful. Evil can have as much "influence" on us as good.

#### 6. You Are Also Writing About Yourself

When the prompt asks you to "describe that influence," it is asking you to be reflective and introspective. While an essay for option #3 is partly about the influential person, it is equally about you. To understand someone's influence on you, you need to understand yourself -- your strengths, your short-comings, the areas where you still need to grow. As with all the essay options, you need to make sure a response to #3 reveals your own interests, passions, personality and character. The details of this essay need to reveal that you are the type of person who will contribute to the campus community in a positive way.

**Essay Prompt #4: Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.**

Before responding to the fourth essay option on the common application, be sure to consider the 7 tips below. Option 4 asks: Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

1. Don't Do Too Much "Describing"

Although option #4 begins with the word "describe," description in its own right isn't very interesting. If you spend most of the essay describing the accomplishments of George Washington or the movements of a Beethoven Symphony, you will have created an essay that fails to demonstrate higher-level thinking skills. So, be sure to keep the mere description to a minimum, and keep the focus on analyzing the character, historical figure or creative work and its relationship to you.

2. Keep the Focus on the Word "Explain"

This is related to the above point -- while you'll want to keep the "description" to a minimum, you should really do a lot with the final part of the prompt ("explain that influence"). The explanation is where you will present a thoughtful discussion of yourself and the things that influence you. The explanation is what reveals your passions, interests and personality. It's this part of the essay that has the most value for the college admissions folks.

3. Watch Out for Predictable Choices

When option #4 is handled correctly, your essay won't sound like a dozen other essays. Thus, it's often wise to shy away from predictable figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Albert Einstein. Try to identify a character, historical figure or creative work that is a bit less predictable and that connects clearly with your passions and interests.

4. Be Careful with Fictional Characters

You should be wary of choosing a trivial, humorous or cartoon character for this option. If you do, you run the danger of looking like you don't take the essay requirement seriously. The college admissions folks want to get to know you through your writing, so make sure your writing isn't shallow, facetious or dismissive. While it might be fun to write about a South Park character, does such an essay really create the best portrait of you for the admissions officers? At the same time, a skillful writer can make almost any subject matter work. Check out Felicity's essay on Lisa Simpson for an example.

5. Don't Write About Your Favorite Contemporary Song

Music can certainly be a good focus for this essay, but the admissions officers get tired of reading hundreds of essays about songs by students' favorite bands. For one, the lyrics of most popular music really aren't that profound, and you also run the danger of having a reader who doesn't share your musical tastes.

6. Approach the Word "Creative" in Broad Terms

The phrase "creative work" in the prompt often makes us think of things like poetry or painting. However, every field -- engineering, science, psychology, mathematics, religion, medicine -- depends upon creativity for its advancement. The best scientists are great creative thinkers. Some of the best essays for option #4 focus on creative works outside of the arts. For example, a novel technique for attacking the AIDS virus is a "creative work."

7. Keep Much of the Focus on You

Spend a bit of your essay explaining the "influence on you." The admissions folks don't want to learn about the influential work or character as much as they want to learn about you. The essay is a tool for helping a college figure out if you'll be a good match for the campus community. If your essay doesn't reveal your interests and personality, you haven't succeeded in responding to the essay question.

**Essay Prompt #4:** The sample application essay below was written by Felicity for personal essay option #4 of the Common Application: "Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence."

### Porkopolis

In the South, where I grew up, pork is a vegetable. Actually, it's used as a "seasoning," but so commonly that it's almost impossible to find salad without bacon, greens without fatback, white beans free of pinkish shreds of ham. It was difficult for me, then, when I decided to become a vegetarian. The decision itself, made for the usual reasons of health, ethics and ecological conservation, was easy; putting it into practice, however, was another matter. At every restaurant, every school lunch, every church potluck, every family gathering, there was meat—in the entrée, the sides, the condiments. I suspected even innocent-seeming pie crusts of secretly harboring lard.

Eventually I worked out a system: I brought my own lunches to school, asked servers about the broth used in the soup of the day, avoided the usual suspects of beans and greens. This system worked well enough in public, but at home, I faced the challenge of respecting my parents and harmoniously sharing meals with them. They were excellent cooks, both of them, and I had always enjoyed the country-fried steaks, burgers and ribs they'd served to me for so many years—how could I now say "no" to those delicacies without angering or inconveniencing them, or, worse, hurting their feelings?

I couldn't. And so, I backslid. I'd manage to live a pure, meatless life for a few weeks, subsisting on pasta and salads. Then, Dad would grill an especially juicy teriyaki-marinated flank steak, look at me hopefully, and offer a slice—and I would accept. I'd mend my ways, steam rice and stir-fry snow peas with mushrooms . . . and crumble at the first whiff of the Thanksgiving turkey roasting in the oven and the proud smile on my mother's face. My noble goals, it seemed, were doomed.

But then, I found a role model, one who demonstrated to me that I could live without meat and still be a functioning member of society, eschew my parents' pork chops and fried chicken without giving offense. I wish I could say that I was inspired by one of history's great artists like Leonardo da Vinci, or a leader and inventor like Benjamin Franklin, but no. My inspiration was Lisa Simpson.

Let me pause here to acknowledge how absurd it is to be inspired by an animated sitcom character, albeit one as smart and together as Lisa. Yet it was the very absurdity of feeling, somehow, moved by Lisa's resolve and strength of character, her refusal to compromise her beliefs, that convinced me I could follow her example. In the pivotal episode, Lisa is tortured by visions of the lamb whose chops provide her family's dinner. "Please, Lisa, don't eat me!" the imaginary lamb implores her. She is moved by ethics, yet almost breaks her resolution when Homer prepares a pig roast and is hurt by his daughter's refusal to partake. Like me, Lisa is torn between her convictions and her fear of disappointing her father (not to mention the undeniable deliciousness of pork). But she manages to explain her beliefs to Homer and show him that her rejection of meat is not a rejection of him—that she can share his table and his love while still living according to her principles.

Again, I admit—as inspirations go, this one is a little ridiculous. No imaginary lamb-conscience spoke to me, and unlike Lisa, I was not able to celebrate my vegetarian lifestyle by triumphantly singing with Quickie-Mart manager Apu and guest stars Paul and Linda McCartney. But seeing the very obstacles that stymied me being overcome by a yellow-skinned, spiky-haired caricature was so silly that my difficulties, too, seemed silly. "Well heck," I thought, "if Lisa Simpson—a cartoon character, for heaven's sake—can stick to her guns, then so can I."

So I did. I told my parents that I had decided to really commit myself to vegetarianism, that this was not a passing phase, that I was not judging or seeking to convert them, but that this was simply something I had decided for myself. They agreed, perhaps a bit patronizingly, but as the months went on and I continued to forego the chicken in my fajitas and the sausage gravy on my biscuits, they became more supportive. We worked together on compromise. I took on a larger role in preparing the meals, and reminded them to please use vegetable stock in the potato soup and to reserve a separate pot of plain spaghetti sauce before adding the ground beef. When we attended a potluck, we made sure that one of the dishes we brought was a meatless entrée, so that I would be guaranteed at least one edible dish at the pork-laden table.

I did not tell my parents, or anyone else, that Lisa Simpson had helped me say no, forever, to eating meat. Doing so would cast the decision, one that many teenagers passionately make for a few months and then abandon, in the light of well-intentioned immaturity. But Lisa did help me live a more healthy, ethical, and ecologically sound life—to say no to pork, in all its guises.

## **Essay Prompt #4: Critique of Felicity's essay:**

### The Topic

Felicity wrote her essay in response to option #4 of the Common Application: "Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence." When admissions counselors see that an applicant has chosen this option, they expect to find an essay on one of the likely suspects like Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, or Albert Einstein. For fiction and art, applicants tend to think big -- a Jane Austen heroine, a Monet painting, a Rodin sculpture, a Beethoven symphony.

So what are we to make of an essay that focuses on a seemingly trivial cartoon character like Lisa Simpson? Put yourself in the shoes of an admissions officer. It's tedious reading through thousands of college applications, so anything that jumps out as unusual can be a good thing. At the same time, the essay can't be so quirky or superficial that it fails to reveal the writer's skills and character.

Felicity takes a risk in her essay by focusing on a rather silly fictional role model. However, she handles her topic well. She acknowledges the strangeness of her focus, and at the same time she produces an essay that really isn't about Lisa Simpson. The essay is about Felicity, and it succeeds in showing her depth of character, her inner conflicts and her personal convictions.

### The Title

Titles can be difficult which is why many applicants skip them. Don't. A good title can grab your reader's attention and make him or her eager to read your essay. Lora's essay "Eating Eyeballs" is a great example of a powerful title.

"Porkopolis" is perhaps a little less effective than "Eating Eyeballs," but the title still manages to make us curious and pull us into the essay. In fact, the title's strength is also its weakness. What exactly does "porkopolis" mean? Will this essay be about pigs, or is it about a metropolis with too much pork-barrel spending? Also, the title doesn't tell us what character or work of art Felicity will be discussing. We want to read the essay to understand the title, but some readers might appreciate a little more information in the title.

### The Tone

In my list of writing tips, I mention the value of including a little humor to keep the essay fun and engaging. Felicity manages humor with wonderful effect. At no point is her essay shallow or flip, but her catalog of southern pork dishes and introduction of Lisa Simpson are likely to receive a chuckle from her reader.

The essay's humor, however, is balanced with a serious discussion of a challenge Felicity faced in her life. Despite the choice of Lisa Simpson as a role model, Felicity comes across as a thoughtful and caring person who struggles to mesh the needs of others with her own convictions.

### The Writing

At about 850 words, Felicity's essay is a good length, and there's no obvious fluff or digression that needs to be cut. Also, Felicity is clearly a strong writer. The prose is graceful and fluid. The mastery of style and language marks Felicity as a writer who would be capable of performing well at the country's top colleges and universities.

Felicity grabs our attention with her humorous first sentence, and the essay holds our interest throughout because of the shifts between the serious and the whimsical, the personal and the universal, the real and the fictional. The sentences mirror these shifts as Felicity moves between short and long phrases, and simple and complex sentence structures.

I imagine there are strict grammarians who would object to Felicity's liberal use of the dash and her lack of the word "and" to introduce the final items in some of her lists. Also, someone might take issue with her use of conjunctions (and, yet, but) as transitional words at the beginnings of sentences. I imagine most readers, however, will view Felicity as a dexterous, creative and talented writer. Any breaking of the rules in her writing works to create a positive rhetorical effect.

### Final Thoughts

Like most good essays, Felicity's is not without risk. She could run up against an admissions officer who thinks the choice of Lisa Simpson trivializes the purpose of the personal essay.

However, a careful reader will quickly recognize that Felicity's essay is not trivial. Sure, Felicity may be grounded in popular culture, but she emerges from the essay as a writer who loves her family but is not afraid to stand up for her own convictions. She is caring and thoughtful, playful and serious, inward and outward looking. In short, she sounds like a great person to invite to join one's campus community.

**Essay Prompt #5: A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.**

Before responding to the fifth essay option on the common application, be sure to consider the 5 tips below. Option 5 asks: A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

1. Diversity Isn't Just About Race

The prompt for option #5 explicitly states that you should define diversity in broad terms. It isn't just about skin color. Colleges want to enroll students who have a diverse range of interests, beliefs and experiences. Many college applicants quickly shy away from this option because they don't think they bring diversity to a campus. Not true. Even a white male from the suburbs has values and life experiences that are uniquely his own.

2. Understand Why Colleges Want "Diversity"

Option #5 is designed to give you an opportunity to explain what interesting qualities you'll bring to the campus community. There are check boxes on the application that address your race, so that isn't the point here. Most colleges believe that the best learning environment includes students who bring new ideas, new perspectives, new passions and new talents to the school. A bunch of like-minded clones have very little to teach each other, and they will grow little from their interactions. As you think about this question, ask yourself, "What will I add to the campus? Why will the college be a better place when I'm in attendance?"

3. Be Careful Describing Third-World Encounters

College admissions counselors sometimes call it "that Haiti essay" -- an essay about a visit to a third-world country. Invariably, the writer discusses shocking encounters with poverty, a new awareness of the privileges he or she has, and greater sensitivity to the inequality and diversity of the planet. This type of essay can too easily become generic and predictable. This doesn't mean you can't write about a Habitat for Humanity trip to a third-world country, but you want to be careful to avoid clichés. Also, make sure your statements reflect well upon you. A claim like "I never knew so many people lived with so little" can make you sound naive.

4. Be Careful Describing Racial Encounters

Racial difference is actually an excellent topic for an admissions essay, but you need to handle the topic carefully. As you describe that Japanese, Native American, African American or Caucasian friend or acquaintance, you want to make sure your language doesn't inadvertently create racial stereotypes. I've seen a lot of essays in which students simultaneously praise a friend's different perspective while using stereotyping or even racist language.

5. Keep Much of the Focus on You

As with all the personal essay options, #5 is asking about you -- what diversity you will bring to campus, or what ideas about diversity you will bring. Always keep in mind the primary purpose of the essay. Colleges want to get to know the students who will become part of the campus community. If your entire essay describes life in Indonesia, you've failed to do this. If your essay is all about your favorite friend from Korea, you have also failed. Whether you describe your own contribution to campus diversity, or if you talk about an encounter with diversity, the essay needs to reveal your character, values and personality. The college is enrolling you, not the diverse people you've encountered.

## **Essay Prompt #6: Topic of your choice.**

Before responding to the sixth essay option on the common application, be sure to consider the 4 tips below. Option 6 simply states, Topic of your choice.

### 1. Make Sure Options 1 Through 5 Aren't Appropriate

I've rarely seen an admissions essay that doesn't fit into one of the first five Common Application essay options. Even the sample essay by Lora which she submitted under option #6 could fit into option #1. In truth, it probably doesn't matter much if you write your essay under option #6 when it could fit elsewhere (unless the fit with another option is obvious) -- it's the quality of the essay that most matters.

### 2. Don't Try Too Hard To Be Clever

Some students make the mistake of assuming that "Topic of Your Choice" means that they can write about anything. Keep in mind that the admissions officers take the essay seriously, so you should too. This doesn't mean you can't be humorous, but you do need to make sure your essay has substance. If your essay focuses more on a good laugh than on revealing why you'd make a good college student, you should rethink your approach.

### 3. Make Sure Your Essay Is An Essay (No Poems, Drawings, etc.)

Every now and then a budding creative writer decides to submit a poem, play or other creative work for essay option #6. Don't do it. The Common Application allows for supplemental materials, so you should include your creative work there. The essay should be an essay -- non-fiction prose that explores a topic and reveals your character.

### 4. Reveal Yourself

Any topic is a possibility for option #6, but you want to make sure your writing fulfills the purpose of the admissions essay. The college admissions folks are looking for evidence that you'll make a good campus citizen. Your essay should reveal your character, values, personality, beliefs and (if appropriate) sense of humor. You want your reader to end your essay thinking, "Yes, this is someone who I want to live in my community."

## **Essay Prompt #6: Lora wrote the following college admission essay for question #6 on the Common Application: "Topic of your choice."**

### Eating Eyeballs

I first became aware of food when I was about six years old. Yes, I already knew that you put food in your mouth, chewed and swallowed, and that it tasted either good or bad. But I wasn't really aware of food until I noted that while my friends had dinner like macaroni and cheese, my parents were making chicken cacciatore. I was crushed; I wanted to be normal. So I retaliated by refusing to taste the wonderful meals my parents would make. I would only agree to try the dishes if my parents would let me eat peanut butter afterwards. My fall back plan was a little odd, as I didn't like peanut butter, so I would usually eat the dinner my parents had prepared after acting dismayed at the foreign sounding name of the dish.

As I grew older, I learned the value of trying new things. I learned that eating food that my friends were not used to made me more comfortable whenever I was visiting someone's home. I would eat almost anything, and my parents trusted me to eat without making ugly faces at unfamiliar food. My manners earned me invitations to adult parties where I could curl up, read, and politely eat my dinner. It got me out of having a baby-sitter, and I was proud to be considered grown-up.

By the time I was thirteen, there were only a few things that I wouldn't eat:

- Snails: I thought the sauce was delicious, but my imagination always brought up a picture of some oozing, yellow thing right before I bit into the actual snail.

- Fish: Fresh fish is still hard to come by where I live, and I always imagined the smell of a fish market was something much worse than it actually was.

- Any organ of any kind: I'd heard too many people say, "Ew, gross," in response to the thought of liver or kidneys to even consider the thought that I might enjoy them.

Despite my prejudices, (I'd never even tried any of these dishes when they were prepared by a good cook), when I was fourteen my parents decided that I was ready to go to France without them along to supervise my manners. They sent me to visit my friend Anne's family. The main point of this trip was to improve my French, so I was under orders to speak only French with my new family. With Anne's family, I traveled to Paris, Privas, Saint Jean de Luz, and Saint Malo. For three weeks, my only connection to the English language were the four books that my mother had allowed me to take (I had wanted more). I always ate what my new family served because I knew that my parents were counting on me not only to speak French, but also to be polite, which included eating what I was offered.

The first couple of meals I had in France were reassuringly familiar: a little bit of cheese, omelet, gazpacho, or quiche. Then Patrice, Anne's father and a marine biologist, grilled sardines the length of my hand for dinner. His method of grilling the sardines was charring them. I had tried charred meat before, and hadn't liked it. This dinner was charred, a fish, and it was looking at me with an eyeball in a head that I was going to have to eat. Patrice explained that the best way to eat these sardines was to eat the whole thing -- bones, skin, eyes, and all. Since my French was still a little shaky, I hoped that I had misunderstood him -- one of the few times I would have enjoyed feeling stupid. Patrice made it clear, however, that I was to eat the entire, ugly little fish when he picked one up, pointed to it, and ate it in three bites. I still don't know how he managed to fit that much fish into his mouth.

I forged my way through three of those little fish: eyes, tongue, bones, imagined brains, and all. Then I switched over to the eggplant casserole, a dish I felt a certain fondness towards because I had displayed some knowledge of the French language earlier that evening by saying that an "aubergine" was an "eggplant." My brief moment of fluency had convinced me that I liked the dish, and I became a great fan of squash for the remaining three weeks of my visit to France.

Two days after the sardine incident, I saw little, round, brown things simmering away in a frying pan when I walked through the kitchen. Because they smelled like a particular savory pasta sauce my parents would make, I decided that that they must be mushrooms, and that even though I didn't like mushrooms, at least they weren't eyeballs. The "mushrooms" were served. I took eight, Anne took three, and Patrice took about twenty. The distribution of the food should have made me realize that the savory brown things probably weren't mushrooms (Anne usually eats more), but they smelled so good that I didn't pay attention. When I was on my last one I asked what kind they were; the reply was "mouton." I didn't know different types of mushrooms very well, but I was fairly sure that there was no such thing as a "sheep mushroom." Patrice must have noticed my confusion because his next word, in English, was "kidney." Oh. I ate the last kidney on my plate and served myself some nice, plain bread and goat cheese, a regional specialty. Later, I reminded myself that I really had liked the kidneys before I knew what they were.

Even later that night, I heard a conversation between Patrice and Jean-Louis, Anne's Uncle. I had come downstairs to brush my teeth and heard them talking in the wonderful old stone kitchen. They were remarking (in French) that I was much braver about food than they had thought I would be. That was a real turning point for me because I'd understood a full conversation in French and I knew that I was doing well on the food front. The two men never knew that I had overheard their conversation, but it has stuck with me up to today. Their remarks made me adventurous enough to try different kinds of fish, crabs, snails (which I now love), liver, a heart, and what I think were a pair of rabbit's lungs. Although some things were better than others (the rabbit's lungs had a rather odd, spongy texture), I still tried them.

I visited Anne's family during the next two summers and had several more food and language adventures. During my last visit, Patrice informed me that I was not only to speak in French, but read it, too. I sadly packed away my English books and picked up a book in French. As it was the fourth Harry Potter book, I wasn't really very miserable at all, and I still find it funny that the French word for "wand" is "baguette."

## Essay Prompt #6: Critique of Lora's Essay:

Before I get to the actual essay, consider where Lora applied to college: Brandeis University, Bard College, Gettysburg College, Hamilton College, Kenyon College, and Haverford College. Most are small liberal arts colleges. The admission essay is an important part of the application at all of these schools. The admissions folks will be looking not just for good writing skills, but also evidence that the writer has the intellectual curiosity, open-mindedness and strength of character necessary to be a contributing member of the campus community.

### The Title

Lora's essay has a great title. In fact, there's a good chance you read her essay because the title grabbed your attention. Even if the essay has some weaknesses (which all essays invariably do), the readers in the admissions office will remember her title.

### The Topic

On one level, Lora's topic is rather trivial. After all, we all have foods we like and don't like. Nearly every kid finds certain meals disgusting. That said, Lora succeeds in taking a rather slight and commonplace topic and using it to say something about encountering a different culture. The essay isn't just about "gross" food. It's also about family, travel, social discomfort, maturation and introspection.

Lora was correct to submit her essay under #6 on the common application, "Topic of your choice." The essay could potentially fit under question #1: "Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you." However, is eating an eyeball (or a kidney or a lung) really a "significant experience"? Not everyone reading the application would think so. Topic #6 gives Lora a bigger umbrella under which to explore her rather unconventional subject.

### The Tone

Lora's essay is certainly not as serious or philosophical as Sophie's essay. But put yourself in the shoes of the readers in the admissions office: do you want to read thousands of essays about personal tragedy, poverty or suffering? Of course not. A lighter essay is often a welcome change. However, an essay does need substance. If it has lots of laughs but little depth, the admissions folks aren't going to be impressed.

Lora strikes a nice balance on this front. Her essay is light and quirky beginning with its title and ending with Harry Potter. But it also has substance. We learn a lot about Lora through her discussion of food. By the end, we know that Lora is thoughtful, that she tries to overcome her biases, that she likes to travel, that she works hard to make a good impression.

### The Writing

Probably the biggest problem with Lora's essay is the same problem that Sophie had: the essay is too long. At over 1,100 words, the essay needs about 25% hacked out. These cuts don't need to remove any substance. Lora's prose is certainly clear and grammatical, but she does on occasion repeat words and phrases, and some small details don't add much to the overall essay. In a few places she uses many words where a few would do. As a quick example, consider the first item in Lora's bulleted list of gross foods:

- Snails: I thought the sauce was delicious, but my imagination always brought up a picture of some oozing, yellow thing right before I bit into the actual snail.

A little rewording and we get a tighter sentence, and we go from 28 words to 21, a reduction in length of 25%:

- Snails: the sauce was delicious, but I always imagined some oozing, yellow thing right before I bit into the actual snail.

Even with its length, Lora's essay shows that she can write. The essay has no glaring errors. It has some pleasing structural elements such as the early mention of her four English language books and the conclusion with a French edition of Harry Potter. The essay is wonderfully accessible and down to earth. We get the impression that Lora is presenting her true self -- we don't get the feeling that she's abusing a thesaurus or having a professional editing service write the essay for her. Overall, the essay will convince the readers in the admissions office that Lora can handle college-level writing.

### Final Thoughts

The greatest strength of Lora's essay is that we finish it feeling like we've gotten to know Lora. Is she the type of person we'd like to go to college with? Would she make a good roommate? Does she have a sense of humor? Is she thoughtful? Can she handle college writing? In all cases, yes.

However, this is an essay that easily could have gone astray. When applicants try to be clever and creative, they run the danger of writing something that's more fluff than substance.